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The RPG Issue

featuring
TALES
OF ARISE

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That Breakout Release

Some video game series find immediate success, whereas others simmer with exciting potential until their formulas are fully realized in sequels. The latter speaks to a handful of the most successful RPG series to date. If I polled every person who reads this issue, we'd likely learn that the majority's first journey with Geralt of Rivia was in The Witcher III: Wild Hunt. We'd also likely see their first steps in The Elder Scrolls began with the series' fifth installment, Skyrim.

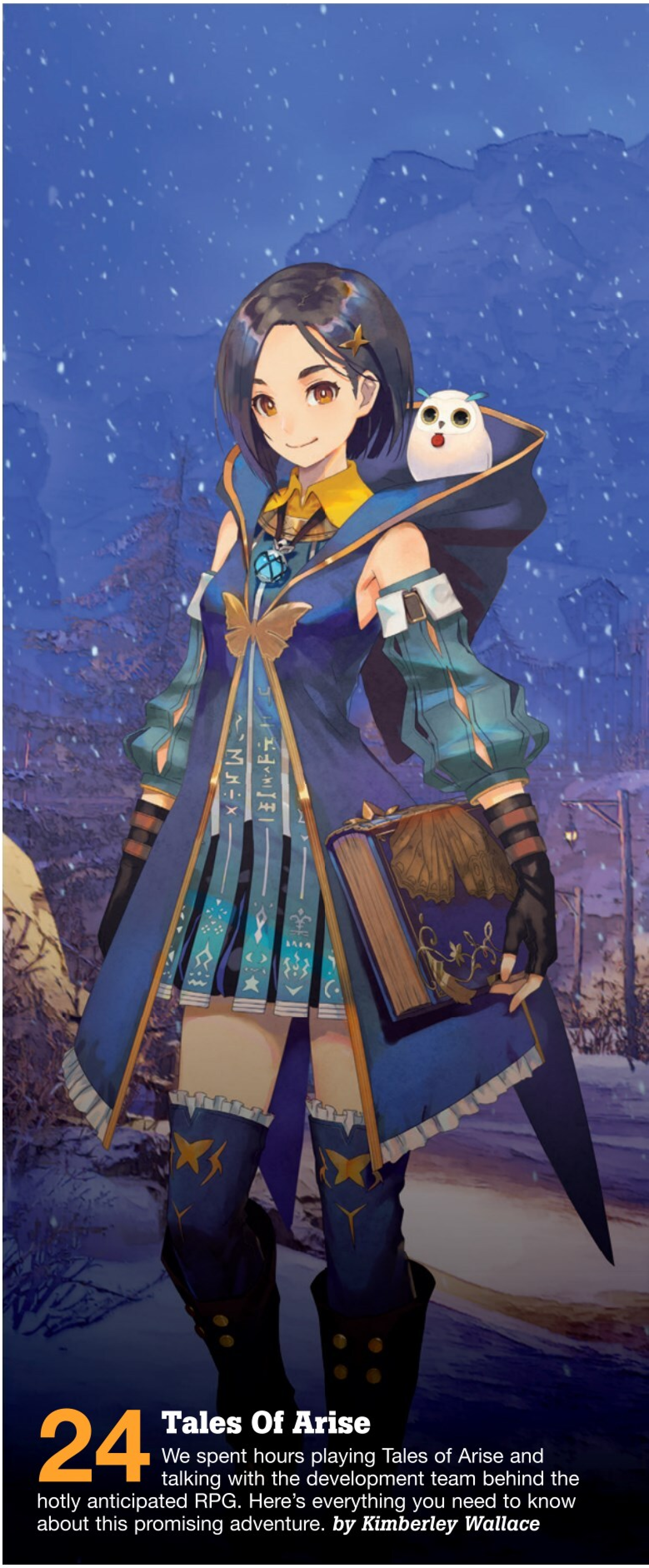
That's not to say the first entries in these series were bad, they just didn't have the "it" factor that turned both into eventual Game of the Year winners that sold millions of copies. With each new installment, developers CD Projekt Red and Bethesda continued evolving their respective games' formulas until they truly represented the intended vision.

For this month's cover story, we're celebrating the entire role-playing genre, and giving you looks at 20 different games to keep on your radar. One of those games screaming of having that "it" factor is Tales of Arise, the next installment in Bandai Namco's long-running and celebrated series. Tales of Arise draws you in with its colorful visuals, but truly dazzles with its vast world filled with discoveries, over-the-top boss battles that push for strategic combat, and new progression systems that promote higher character customization.

Bandai Namco is building up a nice stable of RPG series. Tales of Arise will soon give way to the hotly anticipated Elden Ring (From Software's next Souls-like game) and comes hot off of the heels of Scarlet Nexus, a fantastic first entry in a new series from Tales of Vesperia's leads.

We hope you enjoy the strong focus on RPGs in this issue. If you head to *Game Informer*'s website, you'll find a full month of RPG coverage (and even more info on Tales of Arise) throughout August. In the months ahead, we'll focus the spotlight on other genres to let you know what games to anticipate and consider as "must-plays."

As always, be safe. Be happy. And game on!



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We spent hours playing Tales of Arise and talking with the development team behind the hotly anticipated RPG. Here's everything you need to know about this promising adventure. ***by Kimberley Wallace***

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The Sonic the Hedgehog series celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. To mark the occasion, we talked to various Sonic Team members about what the milestone means to them.

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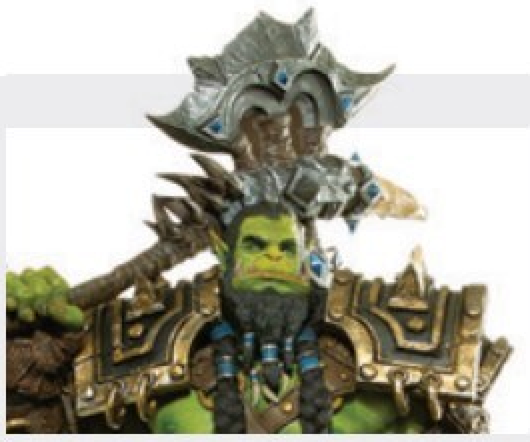

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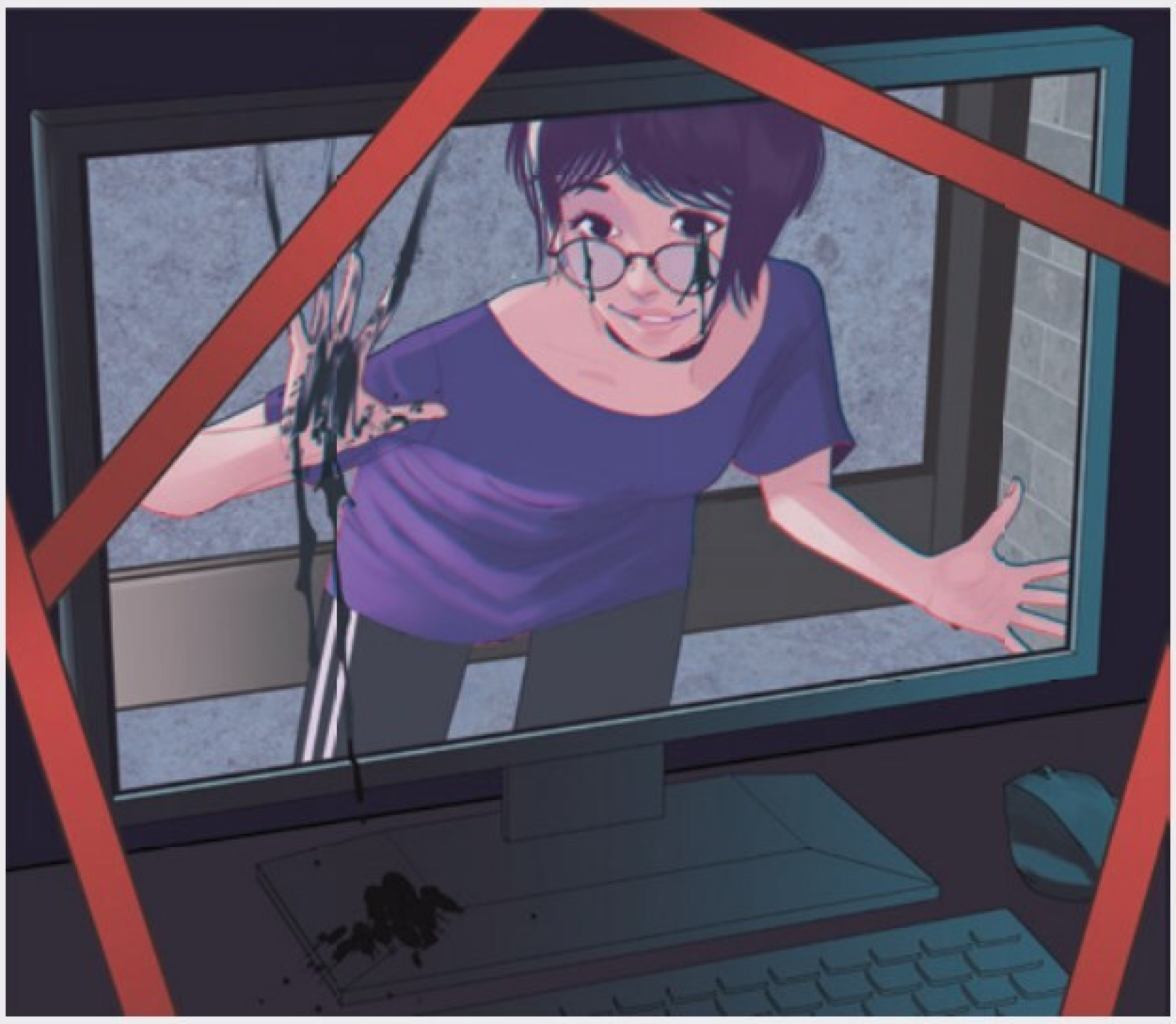
Honor your love of role-playing games with our list of must-have showpieces.



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Despite her viral appearance during E3 2019, little is known about the former director of Ghostwire: Tokyo. In one of her first major American interviews, we learn all about where Ikumi Nakamura came from and what she's doing next.

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Before video games, the role-playing scene played out around tables, and the hobby is now more popular than ever. Check out some of the most exciting recent releases.

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Nihon Falcom, best known for the Ys and Trails franchises, is one of the oldest active video game studios. We chatted with its president, Toshihiro Kondo, to reminisce about the company's influence on RPGs through the years.

38 **Darkest Dungeon 2**
We spent considerable time talking to the team at Red Hook Studios, getting an up-close-and-personal look at Darkest Dungeon 2. Here's everything you need to know about this brutal eldritch horror.

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There's never been a better time to be an RPG fan. Join us as we run down some of the most exciting upcoming role-playing games you should have on your radar.

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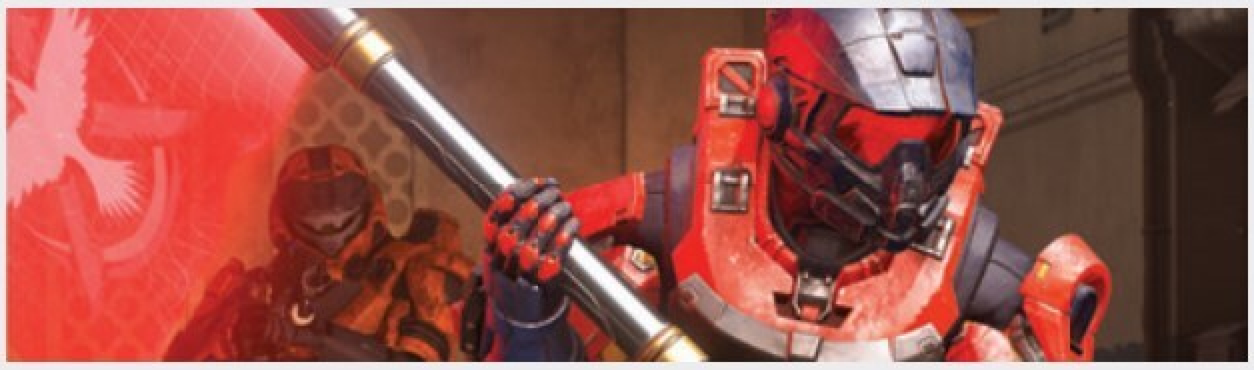
We've been eagerly anticipating finding out anything we can about Nintendo's upcoming adventure. Luckily, during E3 this year, we got a whole host of new information – and mysteries.



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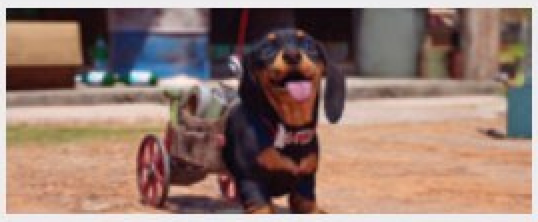

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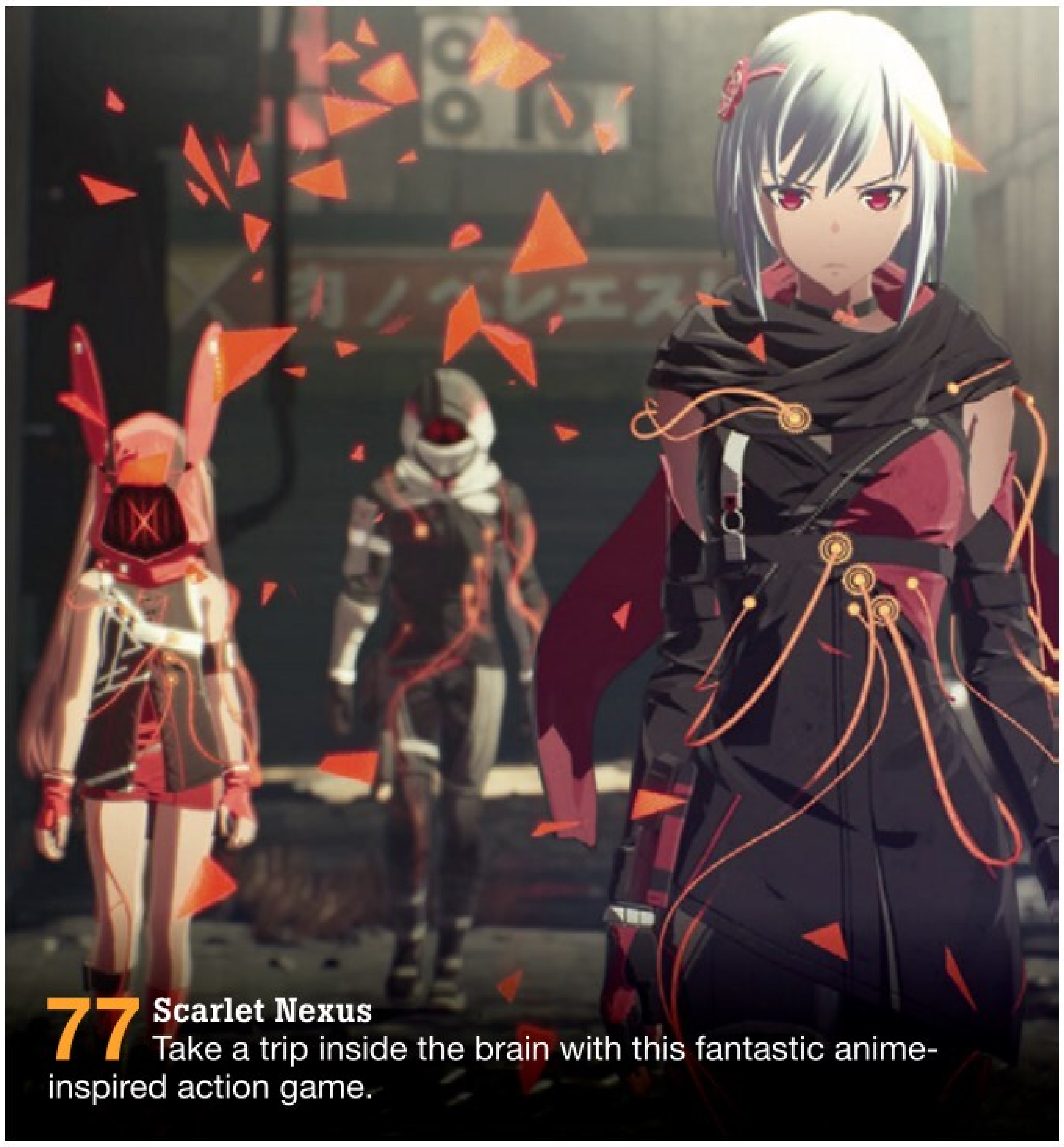

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Take a trip inside the brain with this fantastic anime-inspired action game.

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It might not be the Platinum game some people expected, but there's some surprising and promising features in Babylon's Fall that could shake up the developer's traditional formula.

79 **Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings Of Ruin**
Hunting monsters is always a good time. Learn what we think of the newest adventure in the ever-growing Monster Hunter series.

78 **Mario Golf: Super Rush**
The man of a million hobbies is stepping up to the tee once again. Is Mario's most recent sports outing a hole in one? Read our review to find out.

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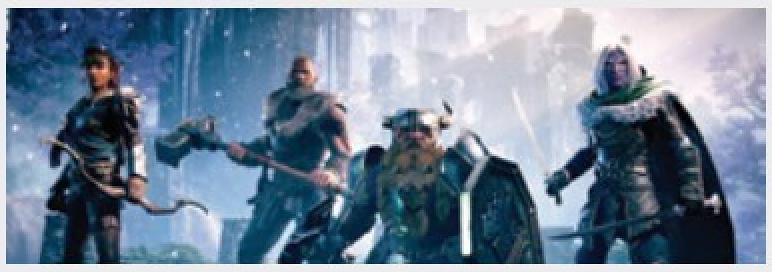
Now with the option to skip on motion controls, here are our thoughts on Nintendo's newest remaster.



81 **Dungeons & Dragons: Dark Alliance**
Despite all of Dark Alliance's disparate parts sounding like they'd make for a great game, the end product is sadly a disappointment.

PS5

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PLAY
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This month our readers want to destroy bots, delete trophies, and bring Skylanders back from the dead!

Marvel's Guardians Of The Galaxy

Great cover, *GI*! I did not see a Guardians of the Galaxy game coming. When Disney announced new Indiana Jones and Star Wars games were on the way, I thought that was all we would be getting for the foreseeable future from the House of the Mouse. Does this mean we can expect even more Marvel games in the future? Insomniac has to be working on another Spider-Man game, but could we also see Black Panther or Captain Marvel leading their own adventures? As your story said, with the Spider-Man and Avengers games, this feels like the start of something huge.

Harold Van
Seattle, WA

Why must video games mimic movies? I thought we learned our lesson on Super Nintendo and PlayStation that summer blockbusters shouldn't be turned into games. I know the Guardians of the Galaxy game isn't directly based on a movie, but it draws HEAVY inspiration from it, and is basically the same vibe. Games should be unique creations from developers, not adaptations of other mediums. It feels like we're going back on the progress that video games made.

Calden Winters
Danburg, CT

I purchased the Marvel's Avengers game and barely played it. My mind kept going back to the movies, and the game characters felt like cheap knockoffs. I didn't have that problem with Marvel's Spider-Man, and I'm not getting that sensation with Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy. The footage I saw lines up the characters nicely with their movie counterparts. What did Avengers get wrong, and what makes Guardians and Spider-Man acceptable for fans of both the movies and games?

Sid
via email

Playing as just Star-Lord is a risky, but smart move on Eidos-Montréal's part. We don't need another brawler like Avengers, and having team choice flow just through the leader makes sense. The game sounds amazing and I can't wait to get my hands on it this fall!

Joleen Garcia
Fort Smith, AR

We agree that some of the best video games out there are unique intellectual properties, but developers have also been able to work wonders with popular licenses like Batman and Star Wars. It comes down to the development team's vision, and we love that we get a mix of everything. Not having a glut of movie adaptations is good, but we do miss them. The best superhero experiences we've played remind us of the movies and comics but stand tall as their own experiences, providing wonderful representations of the heroes and universes they explore.

Cooperative Board Games

Some of the best cooperative moments I've ever had are sitting around a kitchen table with my friends playing board games. There's a level of intimacy that is prevalent in board games, but not something I often see in video games. Seriously, just play a few games of The Captain is Dead, Pandemic, Horrified, or even the board game adaptation of X-COM to see what I mean. Why is co-op so different, *GI*?

Jada Kozlowski
Destin, FL

As you pointed out, being together creates a high level of intimacy, which can be difficult to replicate over video game headsets. There's also more of a time commitment to board games, such as people putting aside an entire day to play them with friends. Video games often tend to be pick-up-and-play and see who is online at the time. With all of this said, both mediums are great for cooperative play, and we like that the thrills they deliver are mostly distinct.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

A Lack Of Visibility

I used to have a good idea of what entertainment was heading my way, but I now feel like I'm mostly in the dark. Amazon cold-dropped a summer blockbuster in *The Tomorrow War*, and most triple-A games are now announced just months before their release. The hype is mostly gone. Being able to roadmap where and when I spend my dollars is becoming increasingly difficult. Don't get me wrong, I love being surprised by the launch of a new *Stranger Things* season, or being able to play Respawn's next game on the SAME day it is announced, but it really is at the disadvantage of being able to plan out entertainment schedules and spending. I can only buy a few games a year and I never like throwing down money when I don't know what else is coming.

Thomas Wells
Atlanta, GA

This is one area where video games could learn something from both the movie and comic book industries. We know when most theatrical releases are coming years in advance, and all comic book companies send out solicitations in a timely way to keep readers up to speed on what's around the corner. Video games are a scattershot of release and announcement ideas. Marketing windows are much smaller than they were years ago, and the free-to-play and downloadable markets make release windows even tighter, as developers don't have to worry about manufacturing discs or marketing to stores. We hope we get more visibility in the future, but it really does seem like more games are leaning on surprise announcements and social media word of mouth.

Defeat The Bots!

I have frustratingly been trying to get my hands on a PlayStation 5 since it launched last year, and I have been diligent in figuring out when they will be available for purchase. Whenever I see them available, my heart pounds with excitement, but I always walk away empty-handed. The amount of demand for these systems is insane, and that's great for video games, but I feel most of the people getting them are running bots that they use to secure as many units as possible with the intent of reselling them for twice the price.

Tyler Stevens
via email

Scalper bots are a serious problem in the retail sector. They've been around for a while, but they became more of a threat at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, snatching up everything from much-needed household items and protective masks to PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X units. The bots can move at breakneck speeds and scan thousands of sites at once. The second an item goes on sale, it can buy them in bulk with numerous accounts and credit cards loaded onto a singular bot. We've seen reports of bots getting hundreds and sometimes thousands of PlayStation 5s. The bots are a disruptive force that has made the leap to the next generation stressful for a lot of people. We hope governments create laws that prohibit bot usage for prized products like this.

Trophy Problems

First time commenter, longtime *GI* reader, and huge fan. I wanted to comment and rant about the trophy system for [PlayStation]. Maybe you guys can shine a light or help put things into perspective (or just listen to me be upset). I have written actual letters to [Sony's] customer service people to have them get rid of some trophies, and I have had no luck! They really don't care, and that list of incomplete games is irritating me. It is very disheartening to see a game on my list as one percent or two percent complete, and having Sony not have any urgency to help me out. I have tried everything! Email, letters, chat online, phone call. Nobody has the "authority" or the attention to actually help. Some of the games are so old that even if I tried playing them, the multiplayer trophies would be virtually impossible to achieve, considering the servers are empty or, in some cases, shut down. Big sigh! My OCD with this incomplete list is killing me.

Junior Gomes
Framingham, MA

Trophies and achievements are still popular and a big part of some people's playthrough in games. Both Sony and Microsoft have done little to evolve them from their base functionality. User curation is a good idea, and any trophy or achievement that can no longer be obtained should be replaced with a new one, or they should be removed. For achievements, this would mean the points to a defunct goal would have to be added to another. We still think Nintendo needs to create a similar system too. Keep speaking up. You never know when you may be able to enact change, but we've seen it happen a lot in games, thanks to people who find issues that need addressing.

294
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Total
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24
163
392
1582

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"What's an indie game you think that doesn't get enough recognition? Mine is The Legend of Dark Witch 2!"

Farm Together, Children of Morta, Spiritfarer, Carto, and dozens of others deserve looks. These days, social media helps spread the word on the indies that hit hard, and it's easier to find them.

"If Super Mario Bros. would have released a decade later, would it even be a series we would have talked about, let alone the face of one of the biggest console makers and all of gaming?"

A great game is a great game and it will always be worth celebrating. Would Mario have been the Mickey Mouse-like figure he is today? That's a tricky question to answer. We want to say yes, but the plumber gimmick may not have been as charming at first glance generations later.

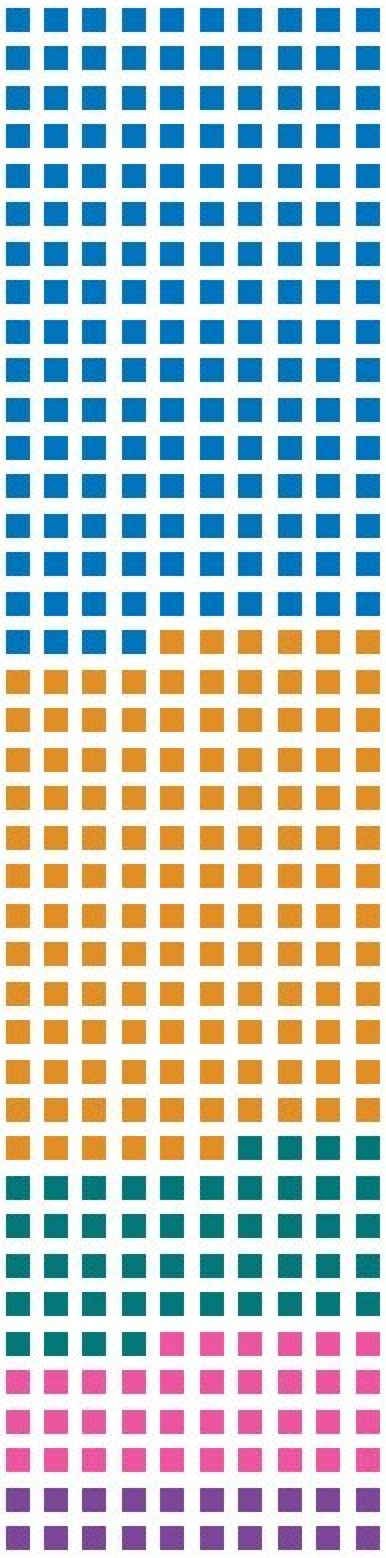
Best Comment:

"Think about this: We have zero games where you play as The Mandalorian and like a dozen where you play as fish or even a shark."

Question Of The Month:

Has one game ever taken over your gaming life? If so, what was it, and how many hours did you put into it?

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Loved seeing all of the game announcements in June
- 🟧 Say Game Pass is the best thing ever
- 🟩 Are playing either Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart or Returnal
- 🟥 Wonder if VR will ever take off
- 🟪 Want to discuss *Loki* spoilers

Metal Gear Solid

Due to the odd flow of the stories, I have never been a fan of the Metal Gear games. My friends try to get me to understand what I'm missing, and it never sinks in. I do, however, respect Hideo Kojima as a master creator – one of the few we have in games. I was sad to hear he ran into issues with Konami and that he would no longer work on the series he loved. My question for you, GI: Should Konami forever retire the MGS series out of respect to its creator, or should they have creative freedom to make as many sequels as they want since they own the property?

Jon Quickley
Detroit, MI

When George Lucas sold Lucasfilm to Disney, he gave them his blessing to create new stories. We like seeing a handoff like this; not just from seeing respect from both creative parties, but for fans to know that the continuation of a story has been given the stamp of approval by the creator, who may also plant the seed for what those continued tales may be. That kind of gesture may not happen with MGS, but we hope Konami would reach out to Kojima before starting a new chapter in this beloved series.

Bring Back Skylanders!

A lot of people stayed away from Skylanders because of the action figures. Here's a crazy idea: What if Activision re-released those games without the figures? They would have to be redesigned slightly to offer the characters as in-game unlocks, but I think it would totally work! There was already a digital edition that did something similar for one game. I would gladly play these games without paying $10 to $15 just for one figure of one elemental type.

Cynthia Berg
via email

Recent years have proven that smart remasters and remakes of existing games can lead to stellar revivals of dormant franchises. The toys-to-life phenemonon seems to have dramatically halted, or at least paused. But there's no reason that the games behind those toys can't find a second life. Game publishers, get on it!

Reader Responses

Last month we asked our readers which comic book character deserves a video game. Here are the heroes they want to see leap from comic pages to the screen …

I will forever hold out hope for a great, open-world Superman action game. I know many people say he's too overpowered, but a good creative team could easily get around that. On the flip side, Venom could be adapted into a ton of different ideas! Stealth horror, maybe a third-person shooter RPG for Agent Venom. Hey, I can always hope!

Pestulio07
WI

I really think Black Panther deserves his own game. With the care and attention seen in games like Arkham Asylum or Insomniac's Spider-Man, I have long imagined how a Black Panther game would be. Imagine exploring a detailed Wakanda map. Not only fighting but doing kingly duties for your people and improving the kingdom and even helping African countries and people around the world. It could have amazing social commentary and just be amazingly fun too.

Monferno
North Bay Shore, NY

We need a new X-Men game – fighting, adventure, RPG, dating sim, whatever. Just give us X-Men already!

Old School Game Dork
Philadelphia, PA

It's criminal that Wonder Woman, arguably the most iconic female comic book character of all time, doesn't have her own game. She has dominated the small screen in the Lynda Carter-helmed TV series and is now the star of a multi-million dollar grossing film franchise. Despite this, Diana of Themyscira has only appeared in ensemble pieces like the Injustice series and LEGO franchise. With her iconic costume, abilities, weapons like the Lasso of Truth, and roots in Greek Mythology, it's easy to envision what a Wonder Woman game could look like. It's strange then that Warner Bros. seemingly has no interest in awarding the only member of their coveted Trinity who hasn't had their name in the marquee of her own digital adventure.

This isn't limited to Wonder Woman either, but nearly every female superhero. With such iconic protagonists as Lara Croft, Aloy, Ellie, and Joanna Dark, among many others, it's a fact that the fairer sex can move units just as well as the guys can. Yet in terms of comic book video games, you can count the number of female-led outings with one hand. You want to know what's even more depressing? Half of those are based on the 2004 film, *Catwoman*.

Blair Farrell
St. Johns, Newfoundland

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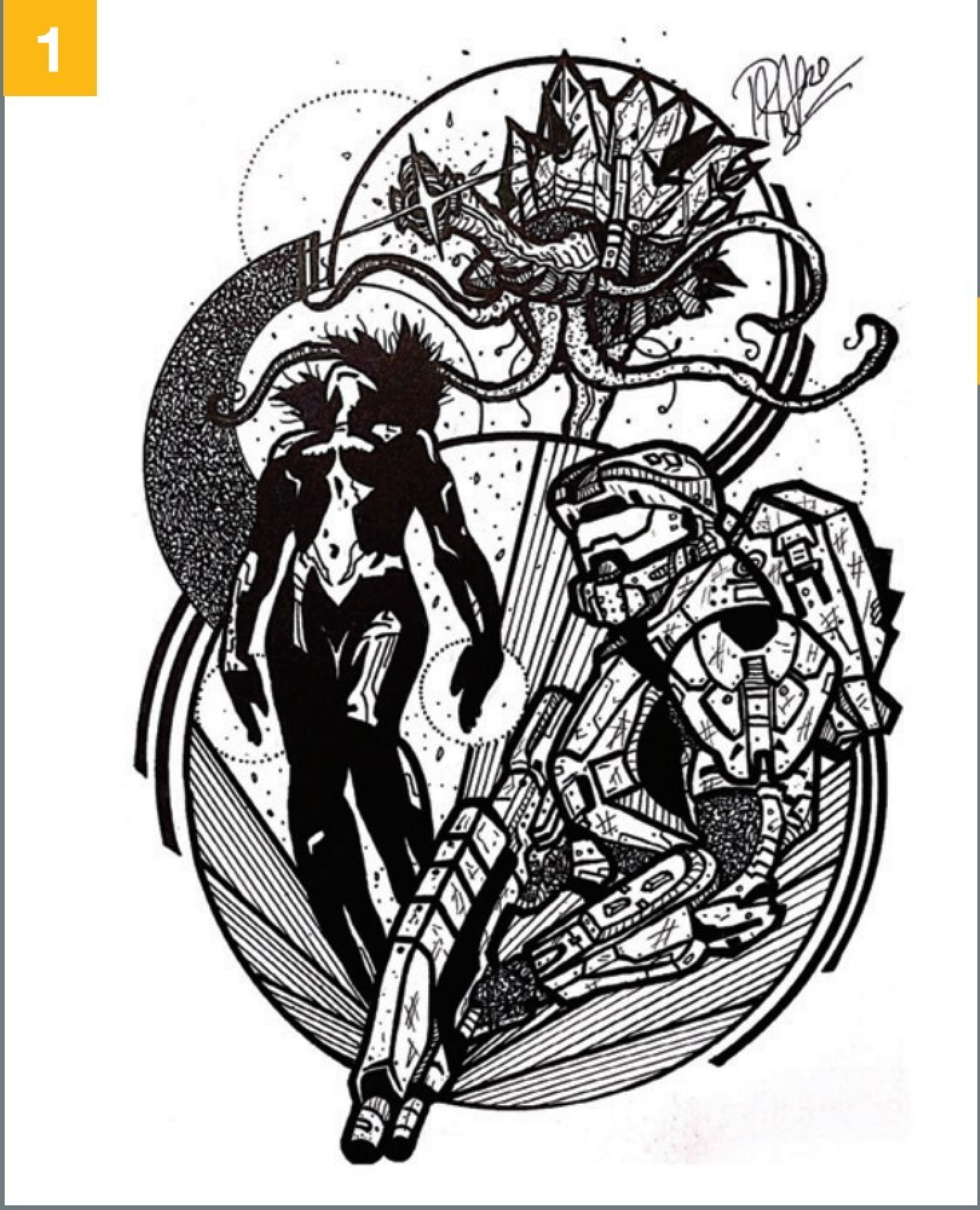

WINNER

1 Patrick Seta
Characters trapped inside a sequence of rings? For a Halo game? We see what you did there.

2 Christopher Collot
While Pokémon trainers fill their days with joyful explorations and friendship, the nightmares after it's all over are killer.

3 Dawn Millspaugh
Please be concept art for a Journey sequel. Please be concept art for a Journey sequel. Please be …

4 Brad Barth
Pool Day in the Mushroom Kingdom can get crowded fast.

5 Chad Ritterbach
The cakes are indeed a lie, but only because GLaDOS scarfs them down as soon as they come out of the oven.

6 Alexandra Marotz, Age 11
With the merging of Pikachu and Link, video game fandom has reached its zenith. Pack it up. We can all go home.

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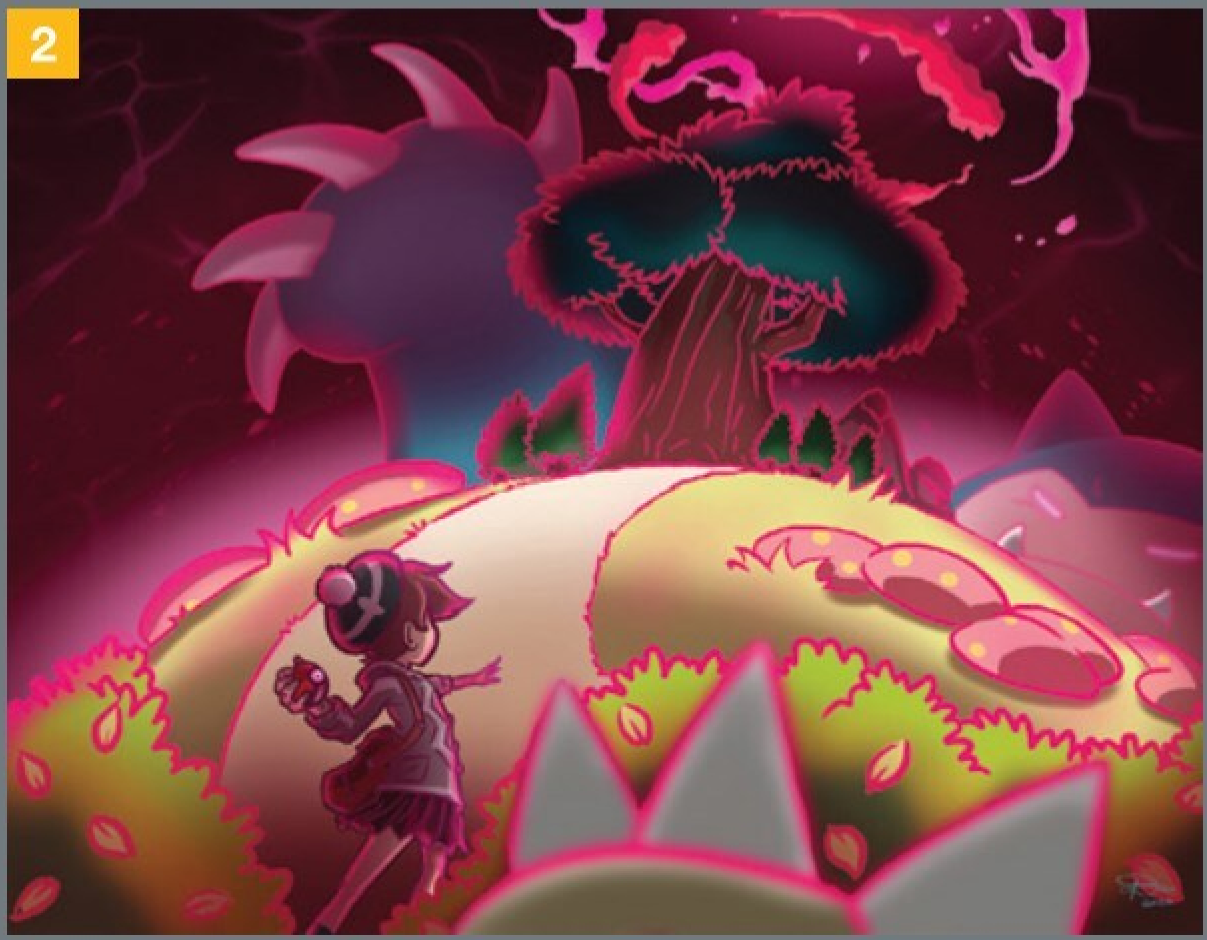

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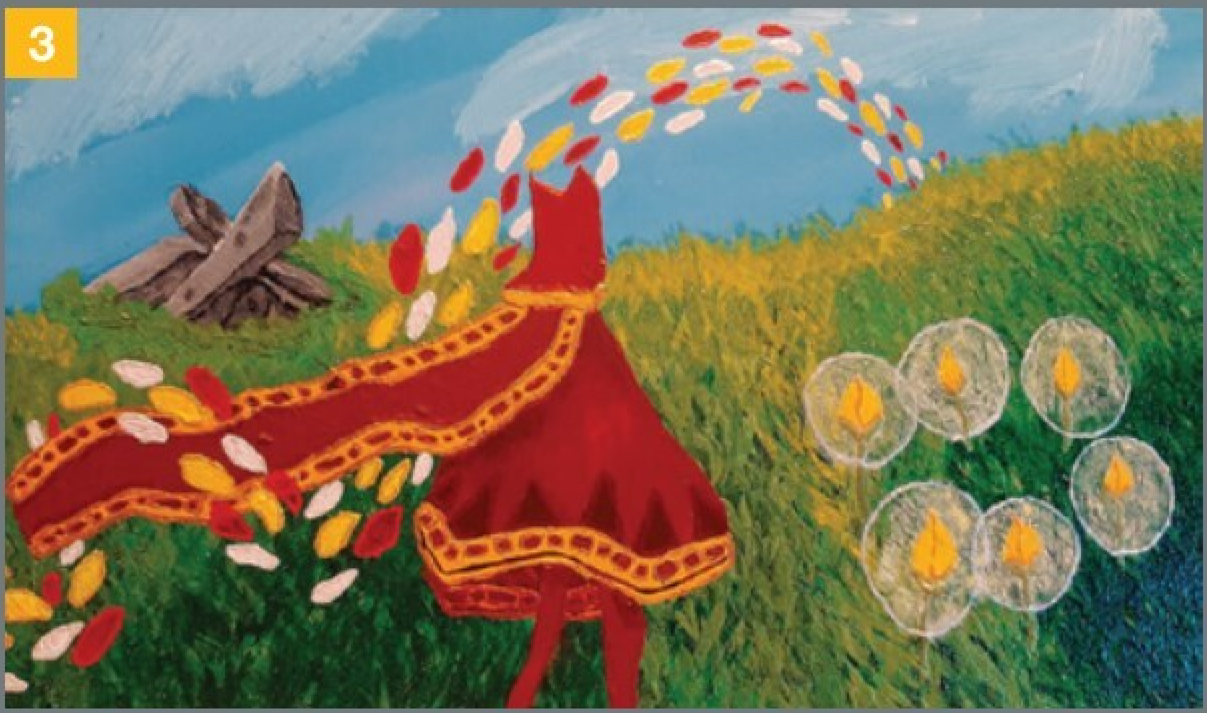

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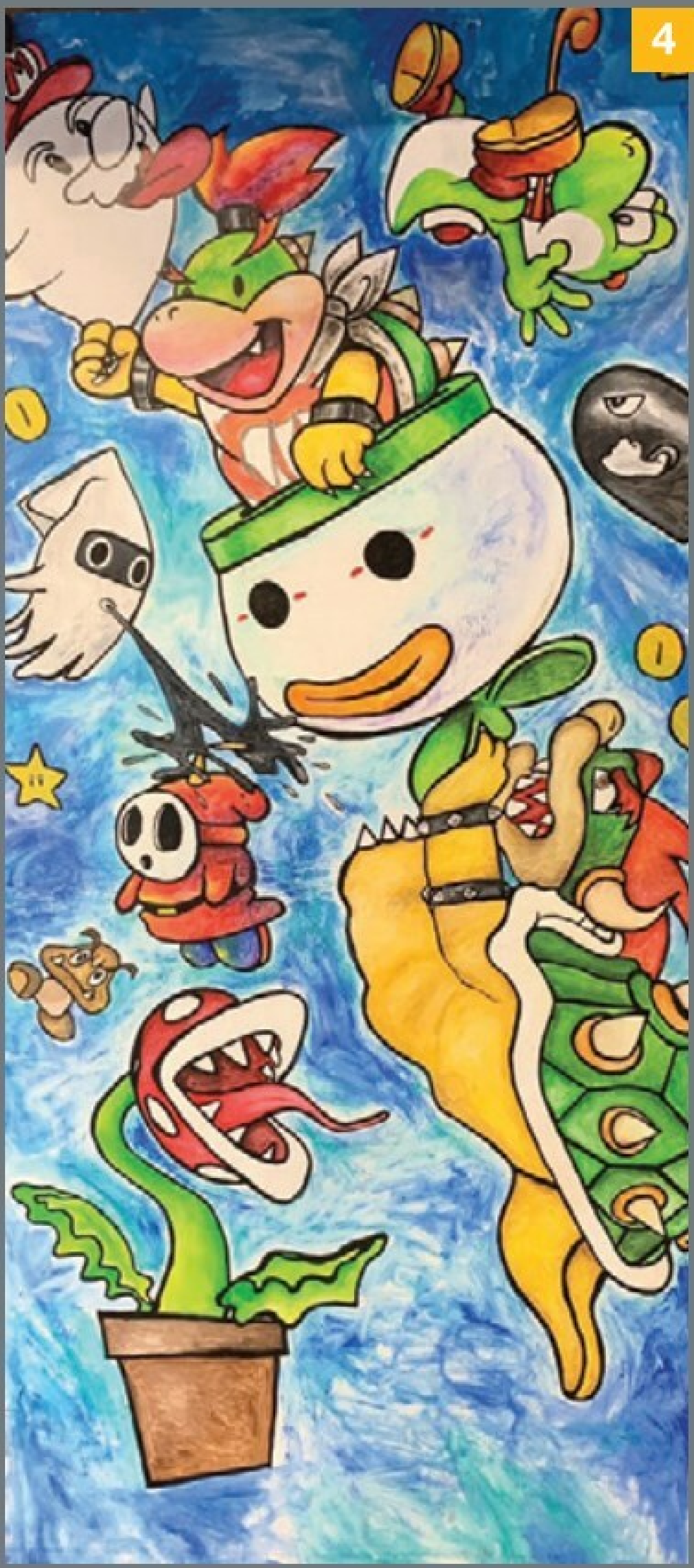

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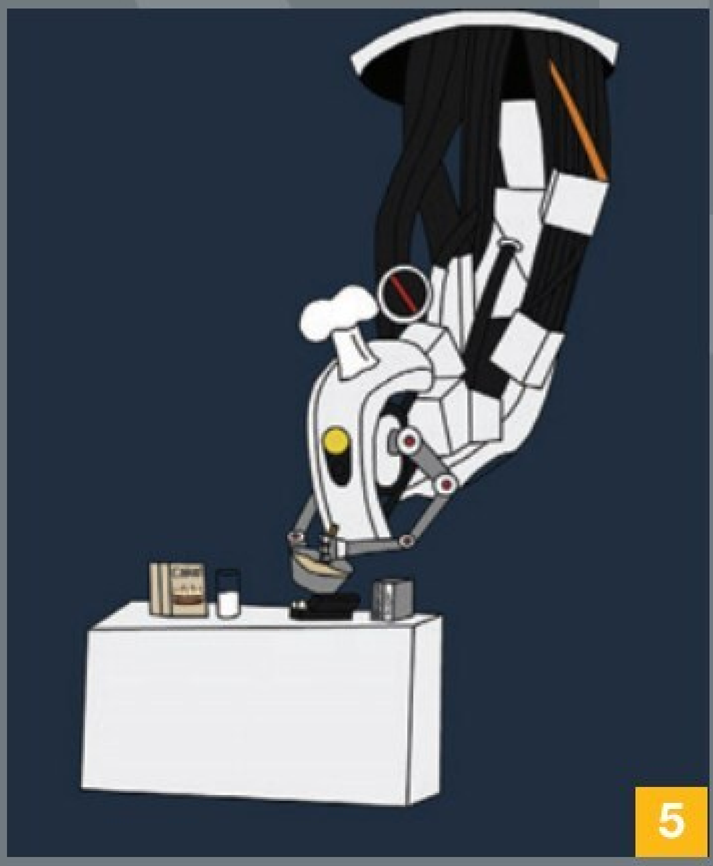

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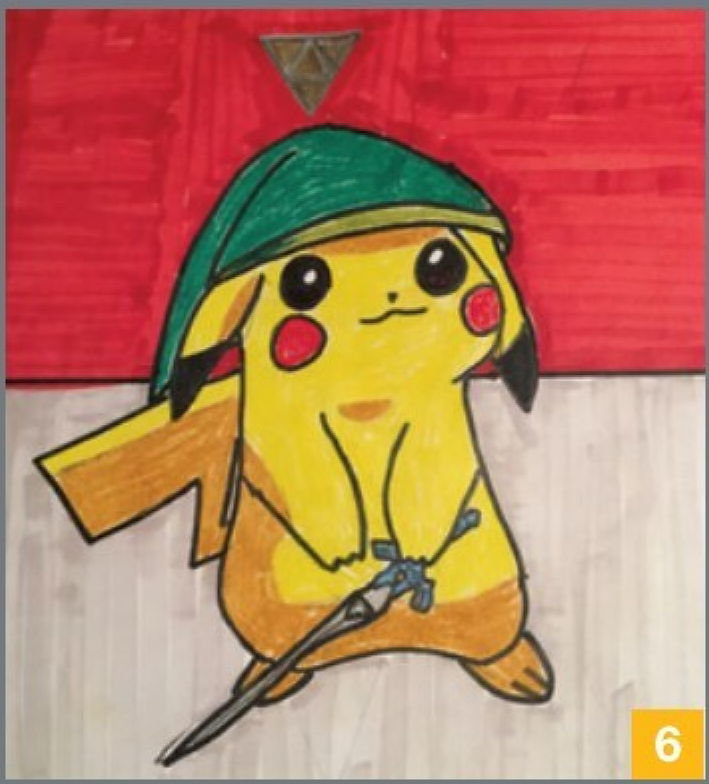

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Sonic Team reflects on the Blue Blur's milestone anniversary

SLURPP
WHOOOSH
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30 YEARS AT THE SPEED OF SOUND

This past June, the Sonic the Hedgehog franchise reached a major milestone, celebrating its 30th anniversary. The iconic hedgehog, born from a 1990 internal design contest to create a character that could rival Nintendo's Mario, not only did just that, but also went on to become one of the most recognizable characters of any medium. With three decades of Sonic history under the franchise's belt, we spoke with several longtime members of the development team about what this anniversary means to them. ***by Brian Shea***

For some, reaching this marker didn't even seem in the realm of possibility when they were younger. Takashi Iizuka, the creative officer and head of Sonic Team, joined the franchise as a designer for 1994's Sonic 3 on Genesis. "I first started working on the series when I was 21, so I had never even thought about 30 years into the future," he says. "But at the time I did have that desire to want to keep making Sonic games forever."

Following his integral involvement with Sonic 3 & Knuckles, Iizuka went on to direct future fan favorites including both Sonic Adventure games and Sonic Heroes. Now, he typically serves as a producer and overseer of the brand, fulfilling his wish to keep making Sonic games all these years later. Various members of the team had no idea they'd be working on the franchise as it passes its 30th year.

"When I was in my early 20s there was no way I could even imagine me in my 50s, so in a similar way I was unable to even imagine what Sonic would be 30 years in the future," sound director of Sonic Team and guitarist of rock band Crush 40 Jun Senoue says.

Senoue, who also got his start on Sonic 3, recalls the arduous communication process between the team in Japan and Sega of America in the early '90s. "On the Japan side, we would create a demo tape of all the tracks we created, then send that tape to America via boat, and the comments we would get back after the team in America reviewed the tape all came by fax!" he recalls.

For creative director and longtime artist Kazuyuki Hoshino, the possibilities for Sonic and company seemed endless even just 10 years in. Because of that fact, the franchise reaching this milestone doesn't seem all that surprising. "After the world really expanded for the Sonic characters with Sonic Adventure, I really felt there were still a lot of stories to tell and a lot of challenges to face with the series," he says. "As long as that stays true, Sonic will continue."

As the years rolled on, Iizuka recalls the first time he realized just how huge the Sonic brand had become: the character's first appearance as a float in the 1993 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

However, both Iizuka and art director Hiroshi Nishiyama agree on a couple of other moments in the brand's history. "For me it was the big Sonic Adventure title reveal event in 1998 and the release of the Hollywood movie in 2020," Nishiyama says. "Even to this day I will never forget seeing just how excited the fans were." That 1998 reveal event, according to Iizuka, had more than 10,000 fans show up to see the first look at Sonic Adventure.

That first Sonic Adventure was character designer Yuji Uekawa's favorite game to work on from his time with the brand. "I was the character designer and also had to make the models and animations for the characters," he says. "I also made all of the artwork used for publicity for the title, so it is a game that has a lot of meaning for me personally."

Thanks to how they propelled the traditionally 2D series to full 3D, both Sonic Adventure games on Dreamcast hold a special place in the hearts of many of the longtime members of Sonic Team. For Iizuka, Nishiyama, and Senoue, they were thrilled to relocate the team to the United States from Japan to create a new experience with Sonic Adventure 2. The experience stands out to all three of them as their favorite Sonic game they've worked on over the years.

"I had a lot of new ideas for the game because of all the new stimulus and experiences I got by living in America and was able to make a game with a lot of great moments together with the other members," Nishiyama says.

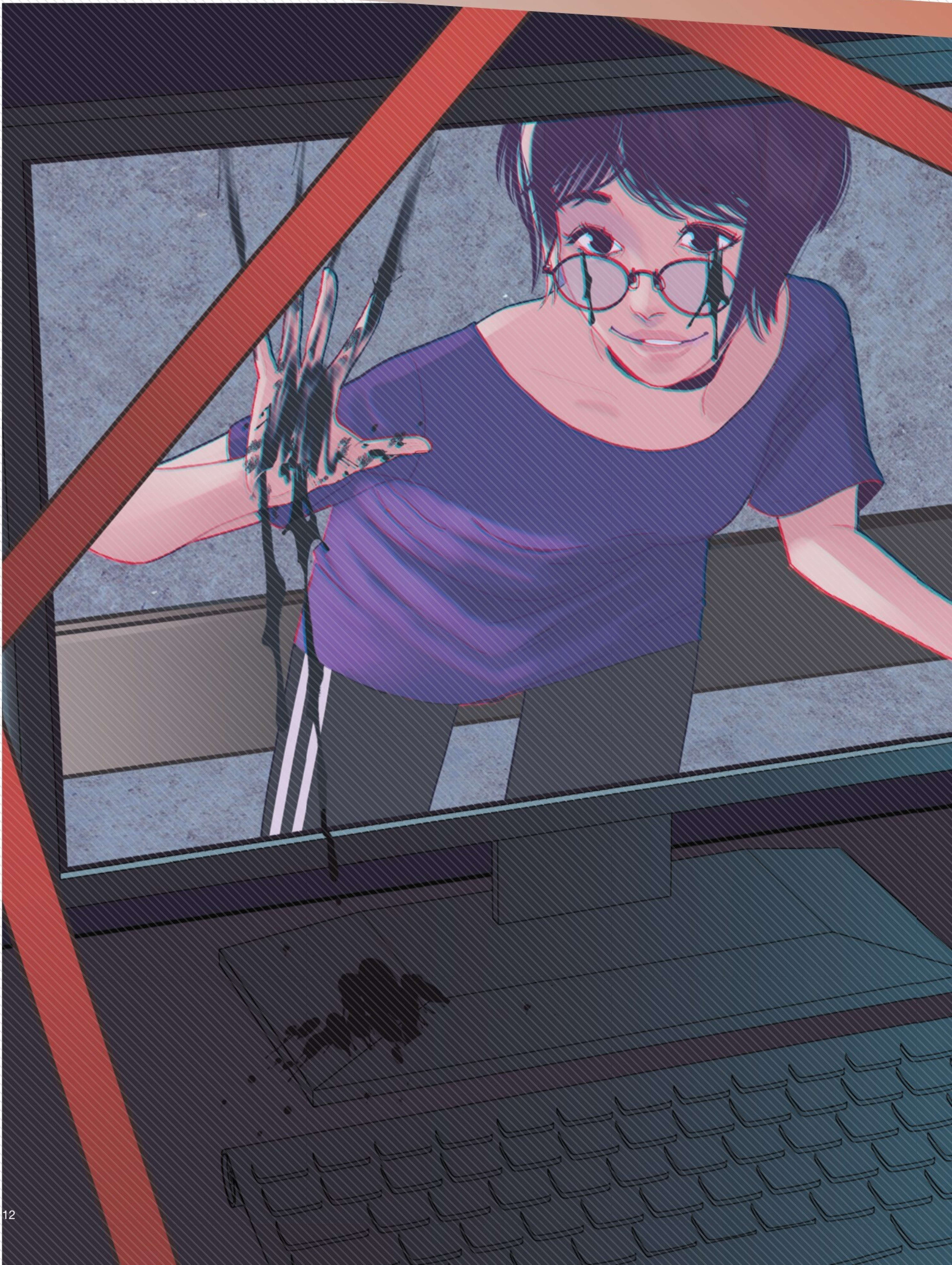
While the development team members all have their own cherished memories with the franchise, they all agree that the best part of the 30th anniversary is how it symbolizes how much the games continue to mean to the fan base. Despite various bumps in the road along the way and some difficult eras for the brand, the team has reason to be optimistic for the franchise's future. Sonic Mania, released in 2017, served as one of the best entries in the history of the series, and this year's Sonic Central anniversary presentation teased three games: a remaster of the well-liked Sonic Colors, a collection of classic titles from the Genesis and Sega CD era, and an all-new mainline game from Sonic Team arriving next year.

Not only that, but both the second live-action theatrical film and the animated Netflix series, *Sonic Prime*, are scheduled to release next year, setting up Sega's speedy hedgehog to kick off his next era with a bang. If the first year of his next 30 is any indication, things might be getting even faster for Sonic. For now, all we can do is wait and see what Sega and Sonic Team have in store for Sonic and his millions of fans around the world. ◆

Game Informer And Sonic

Game Informer joins Sonic the Hedgehog in celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2021. While it's been more than two decades since the Blue Blur graced a cover of *Game Informer* (the last time was Sonic & Knuckles in November 1994), the very first issue of this magazine featured Sonic on the front, forever linking this publication with Sega's speedster.

GAME INFORMER™
Magazine
Sizzling Hot Pre-Release Reviews Inside!
What's New For Fall! Screen Previews Inside
FUNCO: The Best Way to Increase Your Video Game Library!



A LIFETIME OF HORROR:

THE CAREER OF IKUMI NAKAMURA

We talk to the former creative director of Ghostwire: Tokyo about her life, work, and what's next *by Blake Hester*

Illustration credit:
Kerri Solaris (@kerrifique)

Ikumi Nakamura's mother didn't want her to work for Capcom. As she tells it, early in life, Nakamura saw a feature on the making of Resident Evil. In it, the game's creators gather at a bar to drink and talk about the development. Nakamura's mind was made up. She wanted to be a game developer. She wanted to work with the people she saw on screen. Nakamura's mom was less impressed.

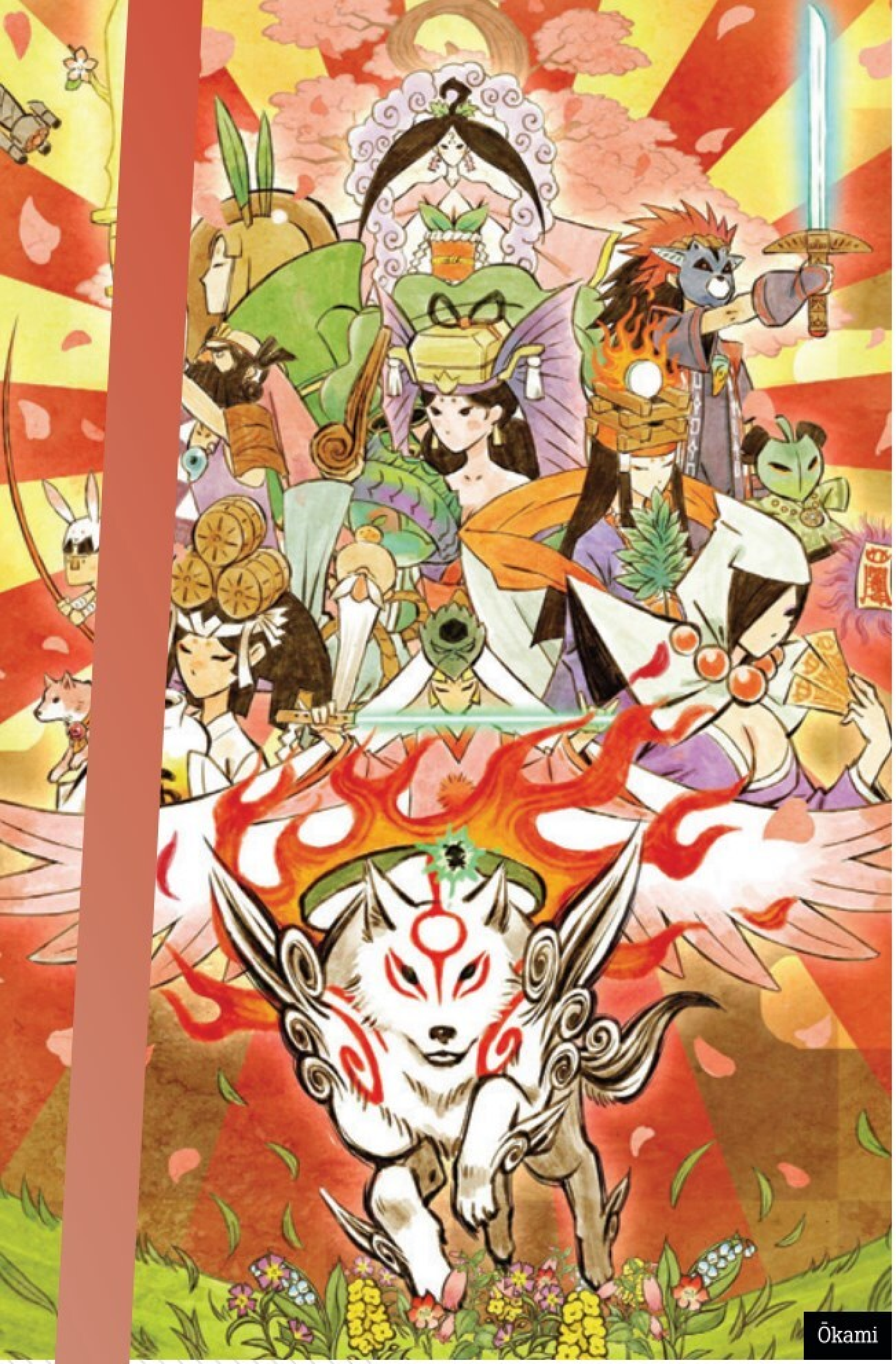
"I saw it, and I told my Mom, 'Oh my God, I want to work with them,'" Nakamura tells *Game Informer* via translator. "And my Mom's like, 'No, don't work with them. They're just drunk, old men. Don't do that!'"

Nakamura didn't take her mother's warning to heart.

Nakamura's first job in the industry was at Capcom; she was an artist for its internal team, Clover Studios. That job meant a lot to her, personally. Aside from being a fan, Capcom's games were something Nakamura bonded over with her father, which offered a personal connection to the work.

During and since, Nakamura's had a hand in developing several cult-favorite video games, including Ōkami, Bayonetta, and The Evil Within series, working for Platinum Games and Tango Gameworks after Capcom. But for the majority of her career, she was relatively unknown within, and certainly outside, the game industry. That is until E3 2019, when her presentation for Ghostwire: Tokyo thrust her into video game stardom – thanks in no small part to her outgoing and offbeat personality. Nakamura has since become a social media favorite, befriending prominent game developers such as Sony Santa Monica's Cory Barlog.

Nakamura is, more or less, an overnight sensation, and since leaving Tango and Ghostwire in September 2019, people have wondered what her newly founded studio is developing. Despite that, much of her story remains unknown – where she came from, her career at Capcom and Platinum, and her experiences at Tango. To remedy this, we reached out to Nakamura, and talked to her for hours – in one of her first big American interviews post-Tango – about everything from her love of horror to her once-daily nightmares while working on Ghostwire, to what she plans to do next.



Ōkami

CAPCOM

Growing up, Nakamura's father kept one secret from her mother: He was bonding with their daughter over a shared love of horror movies and video games.

Nakamura's father raised her the same way he would've raised a boy, and the two were both daredevils in their own ways. Where her father rode motorcycles, Nakamura climbed on the roof of her family's house and jumped off their staircases. Which, to be fair, is a dangerous activity for a little kid, as evidenced by one of Nakamura's childhood injuries.

"One day, I fell from the stairs and lost the lower part of my face," Nakamura says, laughing, explaining she hit the ground face first. "The skin and the lower lip got dragged. It was almost like I lost my lower lip. My mom saw it and she passed out from the shock, so no one could help me out at that time."

Horror media made the biggest impact on Nakamura as a child.

Nakamura and her father hid this from her mom, who didn't approve, and they spent a lot of time watching scary movies and playing horror and gothic-inspired games together.

It can't be overstated how profound an influence horror had on Nakamura; it's something she constantly brings up when talking about her early life. Growing up, she says she watched horror movies every day, such as American classics like *Return of the Living Dead*. She also loved staples of Japan's horror boom from the mid-to-late '90s and 2000s, such as *Pulse*, directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa.

At the same time, as she puts it, Japan was in a "golden age" of video game development, and Capcom was just one of many companies spearheading that charge. Nakamura spent a lot of time playing games in the Resident Evil and Devil May Cry series – which, coincidentally, have been directed in the past by Shinji Mikami and Hideki Kamiya, who Nakamura would spend most of her career working alongside.

Nakamura went to art school in Tokyo and later the Amusement Media Academy to study game design. However, only a couple years into her education, her life was turned on its head. While out on his motorcycle, her father was in an accident and passed away suddenly, sending her life into "total chaos." She spent a lot of her early life acting reckless, but Nakamura says her father's death changed her, leaving her focused on protecting her family.

"After his death, I totally changed," she says.

But one thing didn't change: Nakamura's dream of working at Capcom. If anything, her father's death reinforced her desire to join the company after her schooling. He loved Capcom's games, and during his funeral Nakamura made sure he was still able to play Resident Evil.

"In his coffin, I put a copy of the Resident Evil strategy book and a PlayStation controller," she says. "[So] that he could play the game in another dimension. But I forgot that Japan is a cremation culture, so his bones and the controller got stuck together. I looked at it [as] he never gave up the game, even when he was a bone! I was impressed."

Nakamura had to apply twice, but she joined Capcom in 2004, coming on board its internal Clover Studio.

> **"I looked at it [as] he never gave up the game, even when he was a bone! I was impressed."**

Initially set up to develop Viewtiful Joe 2, Clover was a semi-autonomous studio within Capcom's Osaka, Japan headquarters, tasked with developing new intellectual properties. In line with Nakamura's influences, Mikami and Kamiya worked as directors for the studio – the former overseeing 2006's God Hand and the latter helping make Viewtiful Joe 2 and Ōkami, released in 2004 and 2006, respectively.

Nakamura's first project was Ōkami. She joined Clover as a 3D environment artist – a job, she says, she was "incompetent" at. Despite her lack of experience, and the fact that some people within the company weren't treating her well, Nakamura applied herself and tried to learn as much as possible on the project.

"I was new, I didn't know really how to work, and was constantly told that I would be fired," she says. "I was pushed around, overloaded with tasks and challenges. And so I went around to different sections, to ask about 'how to work better' and what I can help with, helping with anything I could, making animations or small stages, or objects."

At the time, Nakamura describes Capcom as an "old-school" developer, full of behavior that wouldn't fly in a modern workplace. For example, it wasn't uncommon to see developers sleeping under their desks to save themselves a commute – something presented to the public on television in both Japan and the United States. When she was a kid, Nakamura says that when she saw that footage it seemed like a dream job. Now that she's older, not so much. "[I felt like], 'Oh my God, that's what I wanna do,'" she recalls. "But then looking back, like, no, that is totally wrong."

It also wasn't uncommon for Capcom management to let their tempers get the best of them, lashing out and yelling at employees or hitting desks and kicking trash cans. "They would just kind of hit everything around them," Nakamura says, adding that it showed her the kind of company culture she doesn't want to create in the future, for which she's thankful.

"Overall, it wasn't effective," she says. "People do get frustrated, that happens, but showing that physically or verbally, that creates fear in the work environment."

"Now I know what not to do," Nakamura says.

The relationship between Capcom and Clover was an acrimonious one, with constant clashes between management and Kamiya over Ōkami's direction. According to Nakamura, her impression was that Capcom saw Clover as "just the group of weirdos" and a "totally separate entity." As an example, she points to the Wii port of Ōkami, developed by Ready At Dawn, which didn't include the names of the original developers or the Clover logo in the credits.

In 2008, Capcom issued a statement about the missing credits, saying the removal was due to a pre-rendered cutscene containing the Clover logo, which the publisher did not have the legal right to use in a game the studio wasn't directly involved in. "We also didn't have the source to the credit movie itself, so we couldn't just use it and remove the Clover logo," Capcom said.

"I'm sure something happened – politics," Nakamura says. "But it's not a cool thing to do for the developers who actually spent hours and effort to create the game."

Despite the issues, Nakamura isn't wholly negatively about her time with Capcom. In fact, since Ōkami's development wrapped, she's been open about her desire to make sequels that deliver on the original vision of the first game. As she puts it, the game Capcom released was "probably one-third" of what Kamiya initially had in mind.

Now that Nakamura has worked for other developers – specifically ones partnered with publishers based in the States – she admits to wondering whether or not she should've stayed at Capcom.

"What would've happened?" Nakamura muses. "Because, out of all the companies I worked with, Capcom is a company that allowed artists to input their artistic sense in the game the most."

When we point out we expected the opposite answer, that Capcom was the most restrictive, Nakamura adds, "Maybe that's what Japanese people who stayed in Japan [and] didn't deal with other companies overseas, they might say that."

Of course, Nakamura didn't stay. When numerous people left Capcom and Clover to found their own studio, Nakamura went with them, starting her journey at Platinum Games.

PLATINUM GAMES

In retrospect, Nakamura says it's probably for the best that her first project as director didn't get made.

Early into her time at Platinum, Nakamura submitted a proposal for a Nintendo DS game that caught the eye of Mikami, who came over to Platinum as a contract director and external board member. The project, as Nakamura tells it, was to be several small "eerie" games touching on "taboo subjects." The project was greenlit, and despite her lack of experience, Nakamura got to lead her own team. It didn't go well, and the game's subject matter ended up being a point of contention.

"I even went to Nintendo to give a presentation, and they told me if Platinum Games released this through the DS, not that it will be the end of Platinum Games, but Platinum Games will have a really, really bad reputation," Nakamura says.

About one year into development, Nakamura's project was canceled and she was moved to the team making the first Bayonetta, a stylish action game in-line with director Kamiya's earlier work on Devil May Cry. She was a concept artist – even if it was a partially self-appointed title. "I wanted to graduate from being an environmental artist, so I took the liberty of calling myself a concept artist and started drawing designs," Nakamura says. "I think I acted strongly [and felt] that I should do what I wanted to do even if it was in an organization."

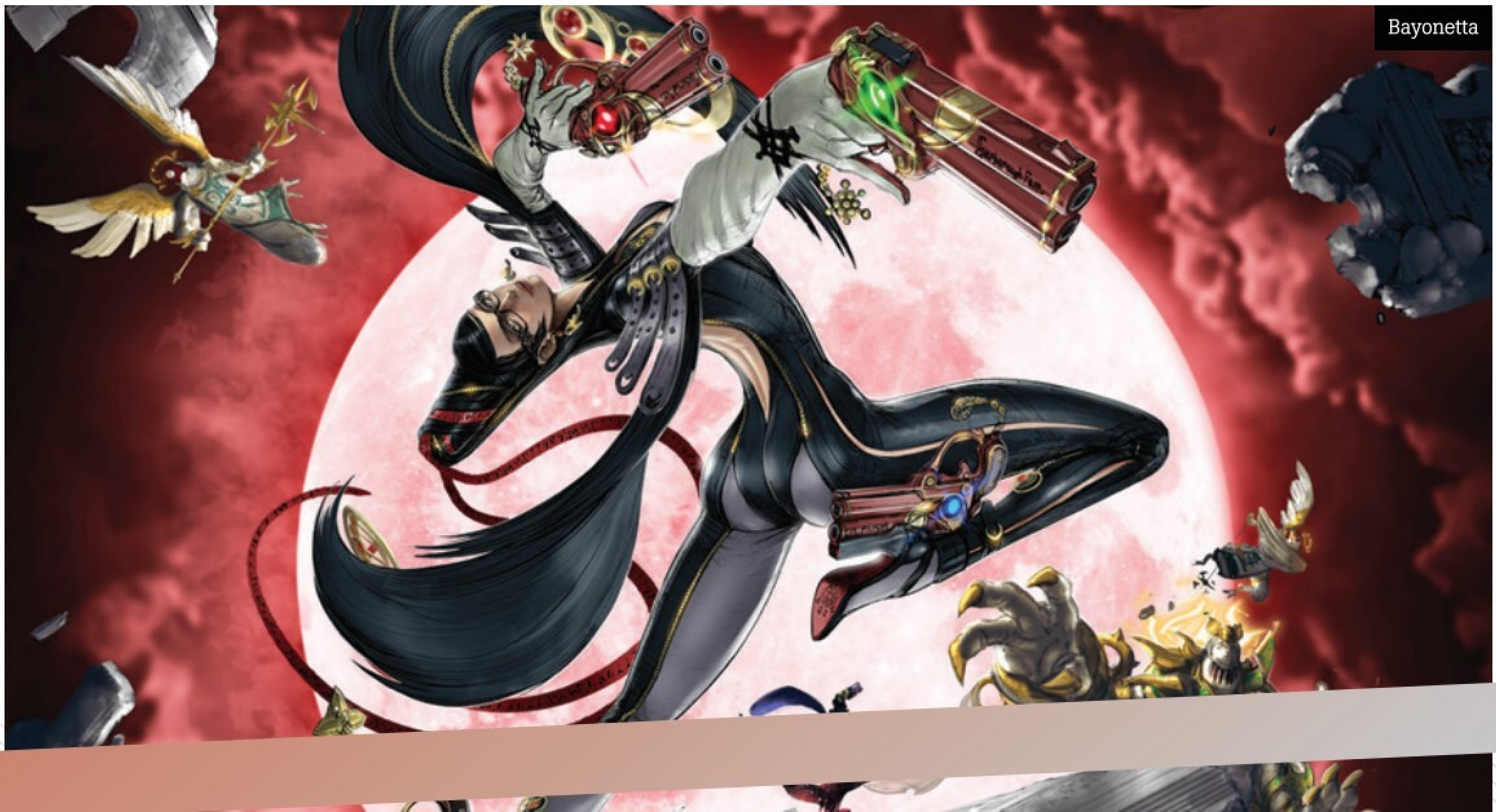
At the time, Nakamura was playing a lot of games developed by American studios – especially Uncharted, Gears of War, and Dead Space. This influenced her approach to game design, specifically when it came to Bayonetta's user interface. Based on the game's female focus, she also brought in influences from famous women throughout history, fashioning Bayonetta's accessories after women such as Cleopatra. To accentuate the over-the-top aspects, Nakamura suggested making buildings gigantic and the action outlandish – all aspects that made Bayonetta stand out when it was released in 2009.

At the same time, Nakamura began thinking about how to develop games that appealed to a global audience, not just a Japanese one. Her hope was to show players in other countries how cool Asian cities and culture were – though her specific vision wouldn't be heavily applied until later games.

Following Bayonetta, Nakamura served as art director on Platinum's now-canceled Scalebound. While Microsoft signed on to publish, it still never saw the light of day. Nakamura says her time with its troubled development left her with lasting lessons for future projects.

"What I still think about is, 'Was I [successful] in creating what the director wanted to do?'" she reflects. "The concept wasn't fixed; it didn't have a strong vision. What the publisher wanted, what the director, Kamiya-san, wanted, and what the team wanted were all kind of not looking at the same direction. So, it didn't have the unity. It was my job to create the unity, and I don't think I was able to provide that. So that's something I felt like I couldn't do back then. What I learned is the director has to have a very clear, strong vision from the beginning."

By the time Scalebound was canceled, Nakamura had already moved on from Platinum. When Mikami founded his own studio, Tango Gameworks, in 2010, Nakamura was part of the group that joined him, allowing her to move back to her home city, Tokyo. It was not only the job she's held the longest thus far in game development, but the one that thrust her into the spotlight.


Bayonetta

The Evil Within

TANGO GAMEWORKS

Joining Tango gave Nakamura a chance to do something she'd wanted to do her entire life: make a survival horror game. And it would be one directed by Shinji Mikami, the director of the first Resident Evil, no less. But it's complicated.

The Evil Within was Tango's first official release and Mikami's return to survival horror. However, the developer had previously experimented with an open-world science-fiction survival game called Noah. As detailed in a 2014 *Polygon* interview with Mikami, early in the company's history, Tango hit financial issues. Noah was canceled and Tango was in trouble. Until later in 2010, when publisher Bethesda purchased the company.

"Compared to the image of a typical Western game publisher, Bethesda is probably more like a typical Japanese publisher," Mikami said at the time. "They don't force creative people to do stuff. They give that creative freedom to developers."

Nakamura tells the story a bit differently. "[Mikami] really wanted to create new types of games, not [keep] doing the same things he's done," she says. "But people in the world wanted him to create – expected him to create survival horror."

The Evil Within 2

Nakamura found herself on a project she had dreamed of making with the caveat that, in her mind, the director didn't want to make it. Rope in Western publisher politics – something Nakamura up to that point wasn't familiar with – and it became a complicated project. The Evil Within, released in 2014, was the last project Mikami directed, and the developer has since stepped into a producer role to allow younger developers to direct games. Nakamura was one of those developers.

After some time on The Evil Within 2, released in 2017, Nakamura began leading development on what would become Ghostwire: Tokyo. Her direction was to take a bunch of elements from her love of the occult, supernatural, and urban legends, and combine them into a contemporary setting – which in this case, as the name implies, is Tokyo.

"Remember when we were talking about Bayonetta, that I wanted people from all over the world to think about how cool Asian urban cities are?" she asks. "So, I wanted to bring that back. I was like, 'Finally, I can make a video game that can express my vision that way.'"

As of this writing, Ghostwire remains unreleased, but Nakamura filled us in on some initial ideas. Set in 2020, people throughout the world have started to disappear, leaving those left behind to assume it might be a virus taking people out. To combat this, people begin wearing masks. However, in 2021, amid the COVID-19 crisis, Nakamura says she's glad that iteration of the story isn't being released. However, she still speaks proudly of the general setting, atmosphere, and supernatural direction.

Nakamura had the chance to present Ghostwire to the world for the first time at E3 2019, where she got on stage during Bethesda's press conference to announce the game. Understandably, the idea of getting on stage in front of thousands of people (not to mention many more watching live) was nerve-wracking. As Nakamura tells it, the numerous rehearsals over three days didn't help. Nakamura isn't a native English speaker, and she says she had trouble with her lines, so she practiced them over and over while pacing around backstage.

However, at the last second, Nakamura says the show's producer told her to forget her pre-rehearsed lines and to go out on stage and be herself.

Nakamura's presentation became one of the standout moments of that E3. While debuting Ghostwire, her passion for the project endeared people to her, and her use of humor to explain the game's atmospheric world was a welcome change of pace compared to the numerous self-serious presentations usually filling E3. Overnight, Nakamura became a sensation, a meme, and in her own way, a celebrity.

"I was simply happy about all the responses, because I was really passionate about presenting what I was passionate about," Nakamura says. "And also, I'm a big fan of manga and anime, so I love all those memes. [...] And that ended up [leading to] people focusing on game creators. So, I feel that was a success."

But Nakamura's time on Ghostwire was about to end. Eventually, the stress of developer-publisher politics and the publisher having control over the game affected her negatively. Nakamura began having nightmares about higher-ups within the company. This went on for years, she says, starting with just talking in her sleep around once a week, and then progressing to daily nightmares.

"The nightmare I had was that when I came to work, all the members of the development team had disappeared,"

> **I feel like I have thrown up in every studio. It's a memorial for me. Don't worry, I threw up without making a mess."**

Nakamura recalls. "Then there was an altar in the middle of the room, and when I looked at the picture, it was of my boss, which was a strange story."

Her health declined around this time as well and four years into development on Ghostwire, Nakamura made the decision to leave both the project and Tango. Getting to that point wasn't easy. Nakamura likens Ghostwire to a child and herself as the mother. Four years is a long time to lead a project, and walking away was a difficult call.

"I was a creative director, so this is literally my baby," she says. "My four-year-old baby. So, to let that go – ask any mother to let her baby go. It was that gut-ripping."

Nakamura became a free agent, but as she tells it, she left without much of a plan. And then something unexpected happened. Once news of her departure hit the internet, she began getting offers from developers worldwide, and she befriended some of the bigger names in film and game development, including Sony Santa Monica's Cory Barlog, film director J.J. Abrams, and Rainbow Six Siege creative director Leroy Athanassoff. Regaining her health, Nakamura even traveled around the world to visit studios, learning from different creators.

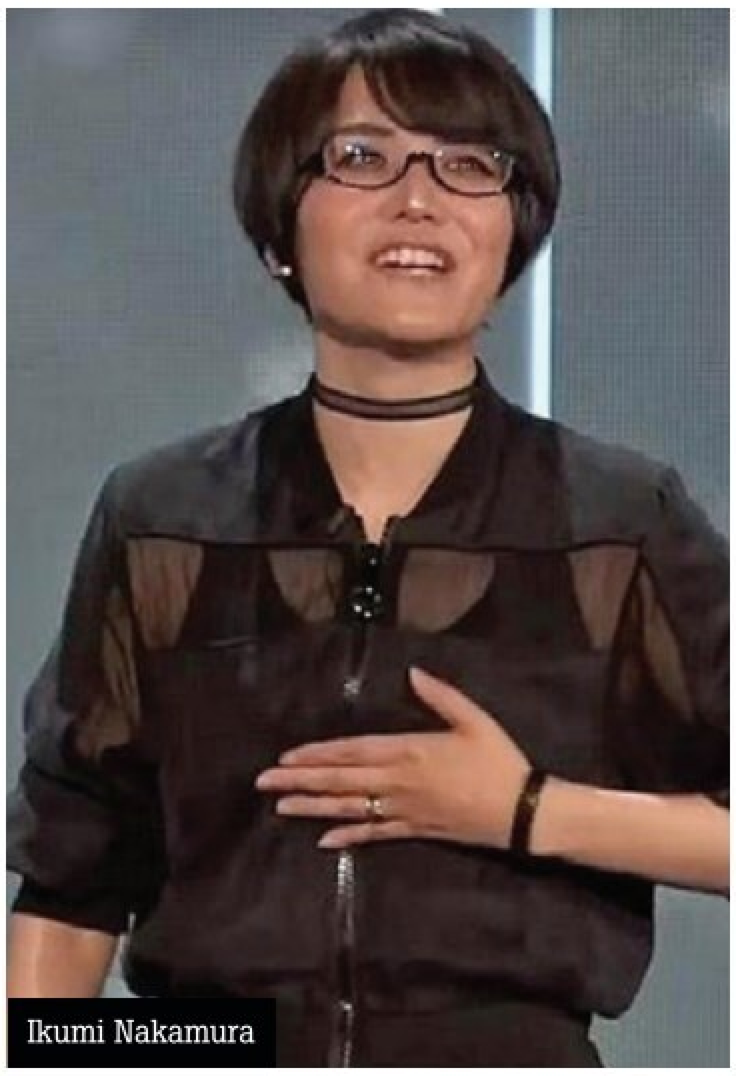
But there was one unexpected twist: Around this time, Nakamura became pregnant. It made some studio visits difficult.

"I had never wanted to have children myself," Nakamura says. "Because I thought that my children would be a game. In fact, I became healthy and an alien came into my body. I flew all over the world and visited many studios while being amazed and throwing up from the bad effects of morning sickness. I feel like I have thrown up in every studio. It's a memorial for me. Don't worry, I threw up without making a mess."

In March 2021, Nakamura announced she had designed a new set of skins for Rainbow Six Siege, the product of her new relationship with the developer. More than usual, the news was picked up by mainstream game press outlets, cementing Nakamura's stardom, even when it came down to something as small as skins. Additionally, Nakamura conceptualized and directed her first music video for the Japanese dance group Dazaifu Mahoroba-shu. She also says she's consulted and done design work for other games, but doesn't elaborate on which as they aren't out at the time of this writing.

HER OWN STUDIO

Nakamura is at a new stage in life, and she's taking advantage of it. On top of her work consulting and designing as a freelancer, she recently announced she's opened her own studio. And while the company will initially be headquartered in Tokyo, Nakamura says she's prioritizing diversity within her workforce, and hopes to open other offices in countries such as the U.S. and China. All her current team members, though working from home, are scattered across the globe, she tells us.


Ikumi Nakamura

Nakamura has also become a visible female Japanese game developer. While people such as Mikami and Kamiya are known by name and for their work, it's not as common for women to receive similar recognition. Nakamura is in a rare spot to inspire others to make similar impacts on the industry, and it's not an opportunity she plans to waste. She says she plans to put other women developers in the spotlight and highlight individual creators when the time comes.

"There is a female creator who is like a big sister to me, who takes care of me," Nakamura says. "She said to me, 'I want you to sit on the throne someday, because your success will encourage me and many other female developers.' [At the] time, I didn't really understand what she meant by that. But now I know what it means."

"It was purely a coincidence that I was known, I became somewhat famous," she says. "Yes, it was a coincidence, but I'm going to make that into an opportunity and use it to work for me."

Ghostwire Tokyo

FIND YOUR ROLE-PLAYING SHOWPIECE

We all love to surround ourselves with items that celebrate what we love and how we spend our time, and what hobbies ask more of that time than role-playing games? Games like Mass Effect and Final Fantasy VII helped define us, so let something from your favorite franchise take the spotlight in your dedicated gaming space. Led by several items from the MMORPG that has defined its genre for nearly two decades, check out these role-playing-inspired pieces to help elevate your home collection. ***by Matt Miller & Alex Van Aken***

1

1 World of Warcraft Thrall Premium Statue

Few characters capture the spirit and uniqueness of the Warcraft universe like Thrall, the orc who rose from obscurity and slavery into leadership and true heroism. This towering 24” polyresin statue shows the warchief and shaman at the height of his power. An especially striking head sculpt captures his facial nuance and tiny hair braid details. With the axe Dra’gora slung over his shoulder, and the option for either an open hand or the Doomhammer in his left, you can choose what moment in history to recall in your display. Exquisite hand painting across the figure and base layer in vibrancy and texture, adding the finishing touches that elevate this piece above the common horde.

$449 | ***blizzardgearstore.com***

2

2 Blue Yeti X World of Warcraft Edition Microphone

If you prefer some function alongside beautiful form and flair, this showy microphone is a great way to celebrate your adventures in Azeroth, even while providing some awesome tricks to add into your audio arsenal. Blue’s stellar Yeti X audio delivers top-notch voice capture for social play, streaming, podcasting, and more. An illuminated multi-function smart knob (with customizable Horde or Alliance lighting) provides excellent on-the-fly options for tweaking gain, headphone volume, and more. But it’s the built-in library of Warcraft sounds, and even the option to modulate one’s voice to sound like familiar characters from the game, that nails the wow factor. Stack the whole thing upon a laser-etched base marked with runes from the game, and this is an ideal showpiece for your desk, ensuring you’ll sound just as good as it looks.

$199 | ***bluemic.com***

3 Burning Crusade Classic Framed Art Print

A framed 24" by 37" art print captures the iconic demon slayer turned villain as he appeared in the memorable Burning Crusade storyline, along with Kael'thas Sunstrider and Lady Vashj at his sides. Attractive black framing is lowkey but effective, emphasizing the dark tones of the demonic invasion that lurks in the background. It's classy enough to be a true art piece for your wall, but awesome enough to make you smile.

$149 | *blizzardgearstore.com*

4 Mass Effect Character Prints Portfolio

You count yourself a Mass Effect aficionado, but perhaps you don't have space for some massive art piece? Consider these museum-worthy fine-art character print lithographs, sized at 8"x12" apiece, each showcasing a familiar character from the sprawling outer-space mythology. Liara T'Soni, The Illusive Man, Aria T'Loak, and Garrus Vakarian are all depicted as they appeared in their respective Dark Horse comic series; each looks great standing alone, but the contrasting colors are especially attention-grabbing when mounted side-by-side. The prints feature silver foil crested imprints on both sides and come in a shared side-by-side black cloth portfolio, suitable for wall mounting or in a free-standing desk panorama. As a bonus, the package comes complete with a digital redemption code for the full collection of Mass Effect comics, totaling over 750 pages of storytelling.

$125 | *direct.darkhorse.com*

5 The Witcher 3: Geralt of Rivia Figure

Not every big collectible needs to break the bank. McFarlane Toys has a well-deserved reputation for good-looking figures that still feature cool options, and with silhouettes that capture the eye while on the shelf. This 12" representation of the titular Witcher shows off his signature armor from Kaer Morhen and includes both steel and silver swords (rendered in plastic, of course). Just like in the games, Geralt pulls no punches, and arrives with grisly monster-head trophies raised high.

$39.99 | *mcfarlane.com*

6 Final Fantasy VII Remake Play Arts Kai Figures

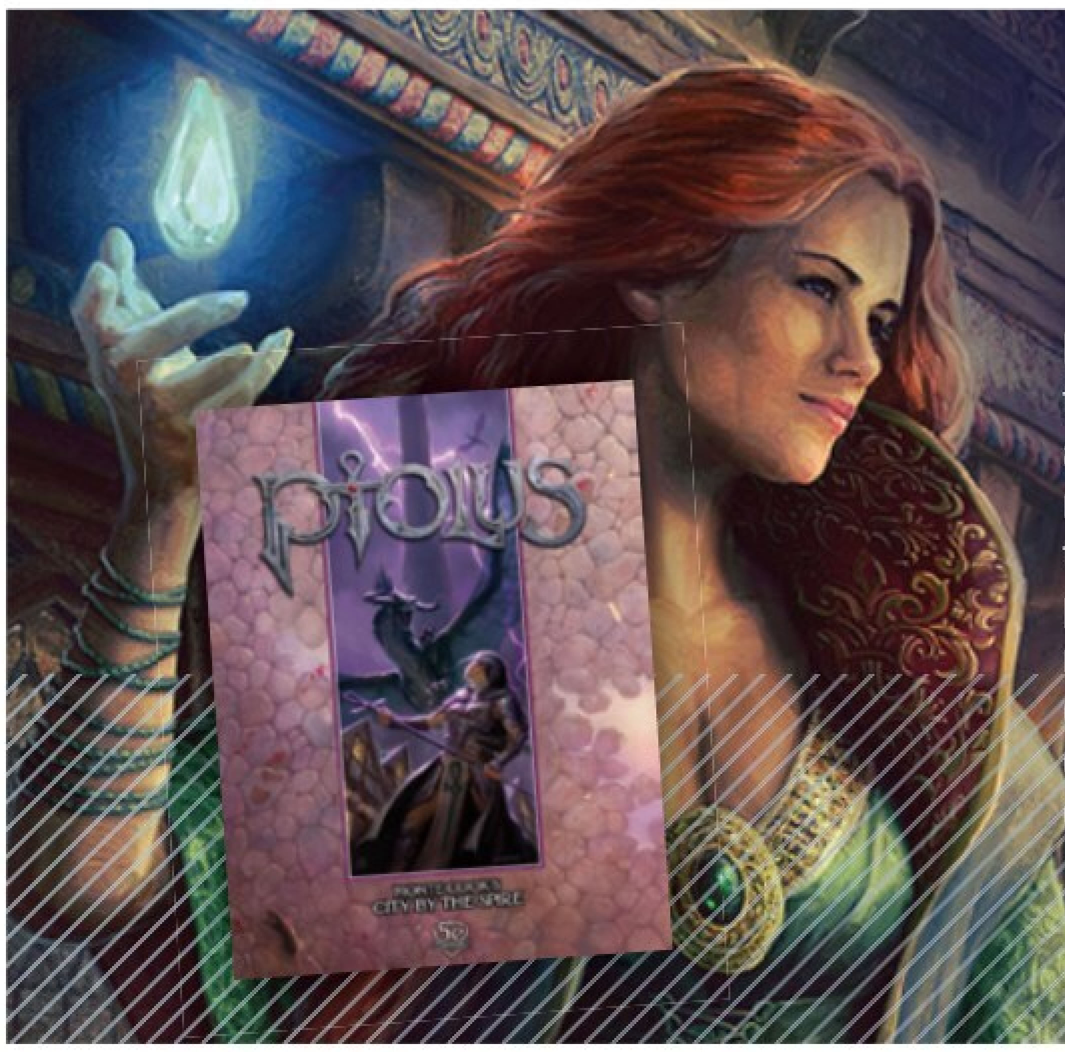
The entire Play Arts Kai figure line has long been an easy recommendation, as Square Enix brings a practiced and careful eye to capturing characters from a variety of media properties. With the release of the long-anticipated remake of Final Fantasy VII, the artists don't take anything for granted, nailing the looks of these familiar heroes exactly as they appeared in-game. From Cloud's piercing eye color to Barret's bright tattoos, the paint work brings the characters to life, while stellar articulation lets you pull off awesome poses, like Tifa in mid-kick. Pick your favorite, or get the whole party lined up as a reminder of one of best RPG remakes ever made.

$154 (apiece) | *direct.darkhorse.com*

TABLETOP RPGS TO REFRESH GAME NIGHT

These recent role-playing games offer a change of pace for your gaming group

by Matt Miller


Ptolus
Monte Cook's City by the Spire

PTOLUS: MONTE COOK'S CITY BY THE SPIRE

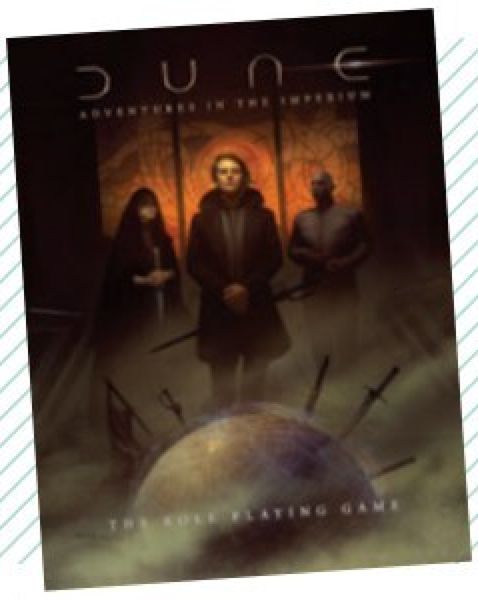
Perhaps your gaming group loves 5th edition Dungeons & Dragons and wants to stick with that familiar ruleset, but you're ready for new locations, creatures, and experiences. Ptolus is a remarkable campaign setting, featuring a sprawling fantasy city of complex politics and warring factions, a massive underground labyrinth of dungeons, and an oppressive evil edifice that towers overhead, begging to be explored. The original version of Ptolus released in 2006 as a published version of the personal campaign run by celebrated designer Monte Cook. This wholly refreshed new version comes with a wealth of handouts and maps, hundreds of additional pages of downloadable bonus content, and a thoughtfully indexed book structure to help keep all the content straight. The entire thing is ably translated to 5th edition rules but is also available in a different version using Cook's own excellent Cypher System.

$149 | *montecookgames.com*

DUNE: ADVENTURES IN THE IMPERIUM

Whether your enthusiasm stems from the original novels or excitement about the upcoming film, the new Dune role-playing game is a nuanced take on the landmark science-fiction universe. Players join under the banner of a powerful House, leading it through political machination, warfare, and clever use of available assets, all to gain power and influence. In a compelling twist, the game plays out on both a micro and macro level, as your character might be in the thick of a big fight or infiltration or alternately acting as an architect of the action, perhaps from an entirely different planet. The Dune fiction is truly vast, and the sourcebook does an admirable job of abbreviating that fiction into a manageable and understandable summary, while the rest of the game book's pages provide an inventive twist on Modiphius' long-established 2d20 gaming system. Love of the source material is a prerequisite, but fans shouldn't hesitate to take the plunge.

$64.00 | *modiphius.com*



Symbaroum
Core Rulebook

SYMBAROUM

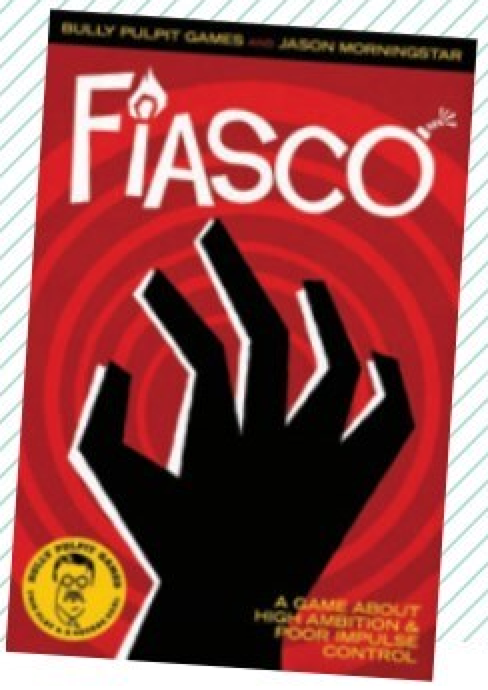
Suppose you're ready for a distinct and intriguing departure from standard fantasy fare. In that case, Symbaroum is a gorgeous game of mystery and magic, rooted in the dark and frightening storytelling traditions of old European fairy tales. Rather than present a diverse world of many locations and concepts, Symbaroum focuses squarely on a particular geographical region dominated by a massive and dangerous forest. Players venture forth into the wilderness and face grim and unforgiving aspects of nature that they are ill-prepared to confront. A concise and easy-to-learn rule system keeps combat and other actions manageable, and players roll all the dice (rather than the GM), lending the feeling that each character is shaping their fate. Fascinating and richly imagined, it's an ideal game to bring new life to a stagnant table.

$45.99 | *freeleaguepublishing.com*

FIASCO

Fiasco has been around a long time, delighting players with its clever mix of weird characters, emergent narrative, and riveting structure. Unlike the fantasy or sci-fi trappings of many RPGs, Fiasco does its level best to emulate the quirky, tangled, and sometimes tragic plots you might find in a Coen Brothers movie. While each player controls a character, the goal isn't to have a better outcome than everyone else. Instead, tell the best story possible, using a web of weird relationships, locations, and character needs as narrative fuel. A recent new edition improves on the earlier design, built around physical cards and a more cohesive structure for play, making the game far more friendly to newcomers. If your players are open to some absurd improv, and you want a standalone experience that occurs in a single night's play, this is an ideal addition to your library. ◆

$30.00 | *bullypulpitgames.com*


BULLY PULPIT GAMES AND JASON MORNINGSTAR
FIASCO
A GAME ABOUT HIGH AMBITION & POOR IMPULSE CONTROL

NINTENDO
SWITCH
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X
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NINTENDO SWITCH OLED: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

by Blake Hester

After years of rumors surrounding an updated Nintendo Switch model (colloquially called the Switch Pro), Nintendo finally revealed its plans for its handheld-console hybrid – and it wasn't quite what we expected. At the beginning of July, the company announced the Nintendo Switch OLED. And while this new model doesn't deliver all the bells and whistles (such as 4K resolution) mentioned in the Pro reports, it updates and enhances the four-year-old console in some interesting ways.

First and foremost is a slightly larger screen; whereas the original Switch's screen was just above six inches across, the OLED has a seven-inch screen. Nintendo promises more vibrant colors and visuals with its new model. While docked, the console will outputs games at 1920x1080 resolution and run them at 60 frames-per-second. For comparison, the built-in screen will have a 1280x720 resolution.

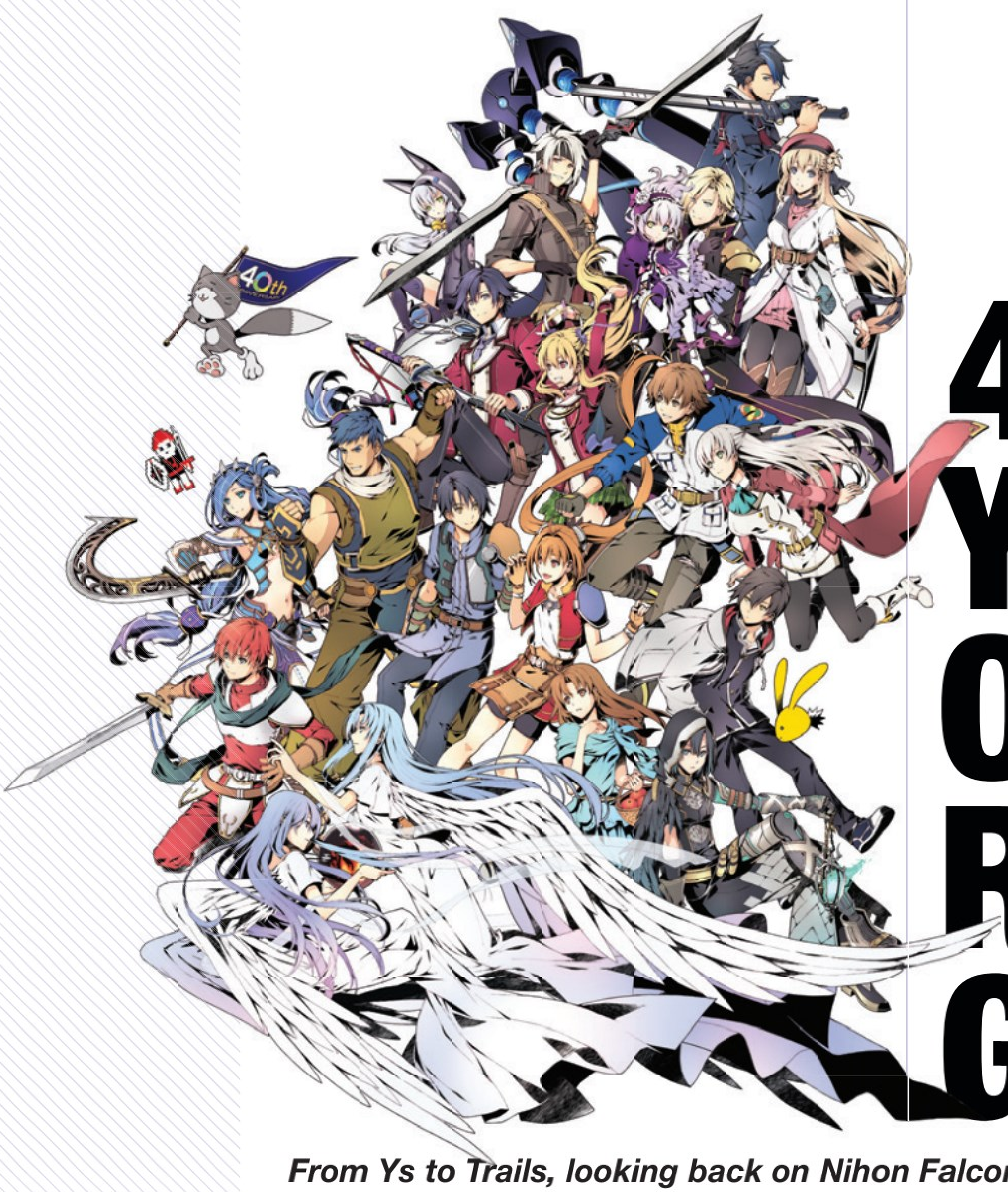
Other enhancements include 64 GB of internal storage, which can be expanded to 2 TB using external memory cards. If you find yourself using the Switch's kickstand a lot, the OLED comes with a better, more stable stand stretching the width of the console. The Switch OLED will be available in an all-white option or a black dock with red and blue Joy-Con option. Nintendo says the new console's battery life ranges between 4.5 and 9 hours, depending on how demanding the game running is. For example, per Nintendo, "the battery will last approximately 5.5 hours for The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild."

The Nintendo Switch OLED releases on October 8. It will cost $350 at launch.

Fans and internet pundits have expressed some disappointment over the announcement; specifically, many enthusiasts are unhappy it isn't the long-rumored Switch Pro. While it is true that the OLED isn't nearly as powerful as the unconfirmed Pro model, it is worth keeping in mind that this announcement doesn't mean a newer, more powerful Switch still isn't coming somewhere down the pipeline. While Nintendo hasn't confirmed or announced anything surrounding the Pro model, rumors pointed to a release sometime this fall. Of course, that isn't happening. Judging by Sony and Microsoft's recent statements about COVID-19's impact on hardware manufacturing and the ways that's contributed to PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S shortages, Nintendo may be facing similar hardware manufacturing issues due to the ongoing pandemic. That is speculation, though.

Regardless, the Switch continues to be a juggernaut system – and a financial boon for Nintendo. While the system wasn't selling poorly by any means before COVID, once lockdown started hitting countries in March 2020, Nintendo reported its profits had tripled over the previous period by November of the same year. Partly due to the demand of Animal Crossing: New Horizons, released in March 2020, Nintendo sold more than 12 million Switches, according to a report the company released in November.

Once the OLED model is out, it'll be interesting to see if and how this impacts Switch sales, in terms of how many units the new model sells compared to base models and how it builds on top of the Switch's previous success. ◆



40 YEARS OF RPG GLORY

From Ys to Trails, looking back on Nihon Falcom's legacy

by Kimberley Wallace

Founded in March 1981, Nihon Falcom is one of the oldest active video game studios. Celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, the company helped pioneer the action-RPG genre, shaping both the JRPG industry and PC gaming scene in Japan. These days, Falcom is best known for its iconic Ys and Trails franchises. While only recently attracting more attention in the West, the studio has retained a strong reputation in Japan, often cited alongside juggernaut Square Enix as one of the most influential and distinguished RPG developers. To honor four decades in the business, we chatted with Nihon Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo to reminisce about the company's history.

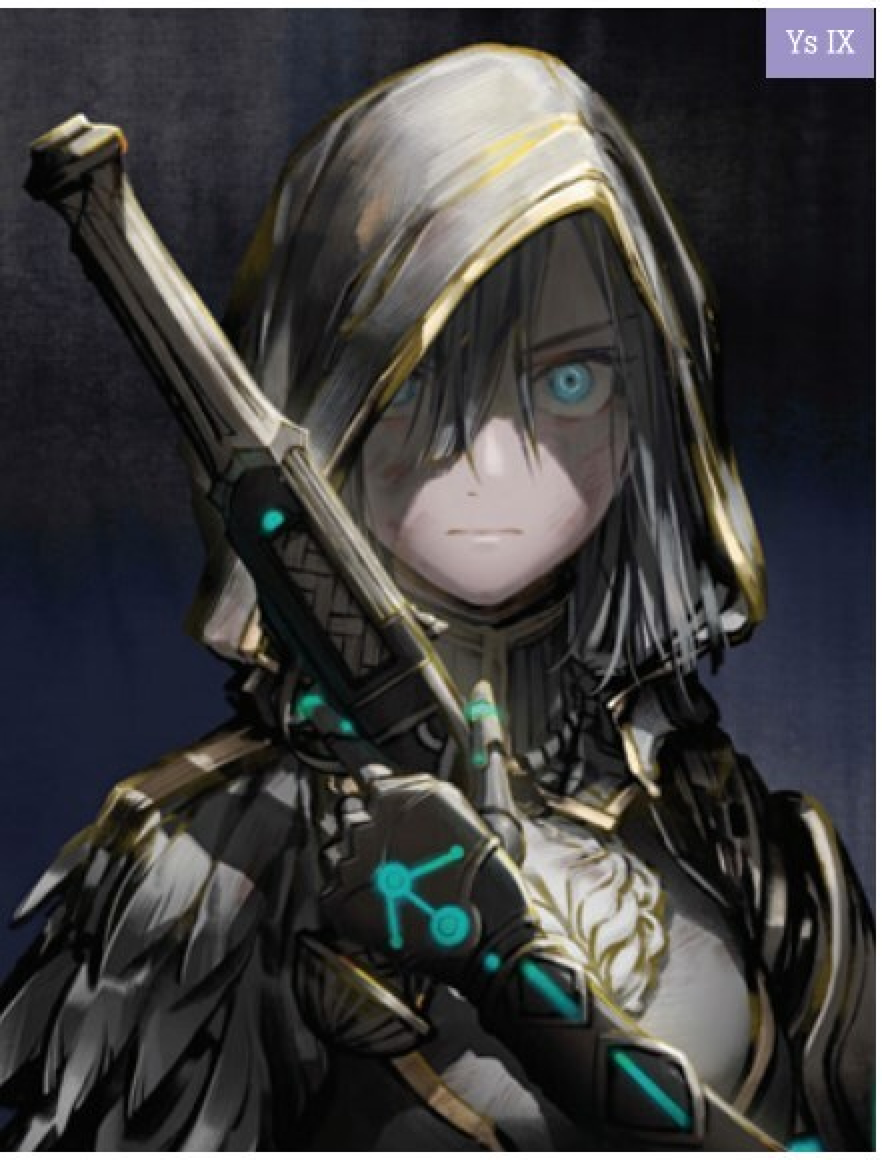
Nihon Falcom's roots are very much in the PC scene; the Falcom name even nods to it. For the moniker, founder Masayuki Kato was inspired by Star Wars' *Millennium Falcon*, but he changed 'con' to 'com' to represent the company's focus on computer gaming. The studio's first game, Panorama Toh, hit in 1983, with Yoshio Kiya at the helm. Kiya would later go on to create Falcom's popular and influential Dragon Slayer and Brandish franchises.

When asked about the company's most outstanding achievements, Kondo recalls the first Dragon Slayer game, which debuted in 1984. The top-down adventure is credited for pioneering the action-RPG genre, featuring real-time combat, an in-game map, and resource management. It also introduced item-based puzzles, serving as an inspiration for The Legend of Zelda series. "Dragon Slayer has been called our first real hit," Kondo says. "That is still considered a great achievement for the industry in Japan, and I believe that was the title that determined the direction of Falcom, which now excels at creating fantasy and RPG titles." Its sequel, Dragon Slayer II: Xanadu, continued the fanfare, setting records for PC game sales in Japan at the time, selling 400,000 copies.

Just a couple of years later, in 1987, Falcom would release Ys I: Ancient Ys Vanished. The series became a flagship franchise for the company and is still going today with nine mainline entries and several remakes. Falcom's other key series, The Legend of Heroes, followed in 1989, and debuted as part of the Dragon Slayer series. It donned the Dragon Slayer name for two entries before the Gagharv Trilogy hit in 1994. In turn, that franchise eventually evolved into the Trails subseries in 2004, culminating in the massive interconnected series that we know today.

Kondo said much of the staff, including himself, had respect for Falcom's games before joining the company but says working on them lent a new appreciation for what made them special. "In the case of Ys, it was the action-packed gameplay that was addictive as popping bubble wrap, as well as art which contributed to the epic feel of the setting. And in the case of The Legend of Heroes, it was the concept of creating a proper story," he says.

Trails of Cold Steel IV



Ys IX

Because these flagship series have been running for decades, the team has strived to maintain their legacy while also modernizing them. Kondo said he will always have a special place in his heart for 2004's Trails in the Sky, for this reason, calling it a "seminal title" for him and other staff members, as it was one of the first to represent Falcom in a new era. "In the case of our [work on the] series, we will be careful not to stray from those things [I mentioned earlier] and add new challenges that are appropriate to the times," Kondo says. "If nothing new is brought to the table, then I don't think we would be able to stand out as much as we have."

Kondo did just that when he took over as president in 2007 and decided to tap into the console market. "For me, switching focus from PC gaming to consoles shortly after I became president was a major event," he says. "Compared with the times before that, I feel like the company's thought process regarding games has become more flexible."

With a company so rooted in PC game development, it was a huge change, but Kondo says it was necessary. "That shift came about because at that time, floor space for PC games in stores was beginning to shrink, and we were being told by distributors that they could no longer take orders as they had in the past," Kondo explains. "Since download sales were not as viable as they are today, one option we had was to go to consoles."

This move allowed Nihon Falcom to expand its audience and redefine its approach to games. "I think in the shift to console gamers, game mechanics and visuals were changed to be more flexible and easier to understand for as many people as possible," Kondo says. "It was The Legend of Heroes: Trails from Zero that determined this direction. During the PC era, titles were likely being made specifically for Nihon Falcom fans."

Falcom started as a small company and remains that way today. Kondo believes its success comes down to the core values established in Falcom's beginnings. "I believe it is due to the fact that we have consistently released games that have met the expectations of our players," he says. "Our games are not necessarily the most advanced technologically, but their content is highly regarded. 'Do it right' and 'don't take too long, don't cut corners' are phrases that came from our founder and are still things we believe today."

These values have helped Falcom stand out; fans often comment on the extra detail that goes into the studio's RPGs, such as fun callbacks to its past games. The best example is the Trails series' NPCs, who don't sputter the same dialogue repeatedly and have their own story arcs that unfold. "Here at Falcom, we have a saying: 'Before trying to solve something with money, try solving it with brainpower,'" Kondo says. "In other words, we highly value the process of idea creation and refinement."

Falcom isn't slowing down any time soon, either – especially when it comes to its beloved Trails series. The company's own 40th celebration stream announced four titles making their way Westward: Trails from Zero, Trails to Azure, Trails into Reverie, and The Legend of Nayuta: Boundless Trails.

Kondo says he's excited about the future and feels the studio has a good blend of creative talent to keep things exciting. "Many of the staff members who joined the company when I did, did so due to the early Ys games and The Gagharv Trilogy, and are now working on the Ys and Trails games," he says. "Current young staff joined thanks to Ys VIII and the Trails series. I'm looking forward to the spin that they will place on their games to make them Falcom-style and continue the legacy as they grow in their craft. Naturally, I intend to continue creating games, so I want to compete with them and come up with new ideas. I want this positive interaction to continue on into the future as well." ◈

Kondo's Favorite Memory

Current Nihon Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo ran a Falcom fan site before getting his first gig with the company. From handling the company's webserver to making official websites for Falcom's games, he slowly worked his way up to an executive and beyond. However, his favorite memory occurred when he was tasked with debugging for Ys I Eternal. Games were a bit more difficult back then. "One day, I spent the entire day on the final boss and even after the sun went down, I still couldn't beat him," Kondo recalls. "Honestly, I think my skill level was above average, too. I didn't want to tell the development team that I couldn't beat him, so as I was playing into the night; the executive sitting behind me said, 'Kondo, enough is enough,' tell the programmers to lower the difficulty.'"

According to Kondo, the executive beckoned the programmers, and they were all against lowering the difficulty, so the executive challenged them to beat it. "All of them tried, but none of them could beat it either!" Kondo shares. "After a while, after many tries, someone was able to beat it and everyone agreed that it might, in fact, be a little too difficult, so the difficulty was lowered. Even still, after the game was released, many players said that it was really hard. Every time we reach the balance tuning stage of an Ys game, I remember this episode."

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Bandai Namco

» Developer
Bandai Namco

» Release
September 10

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Tales of Arise marks a new beginning for Bandai Namco's long-running RPG franchise

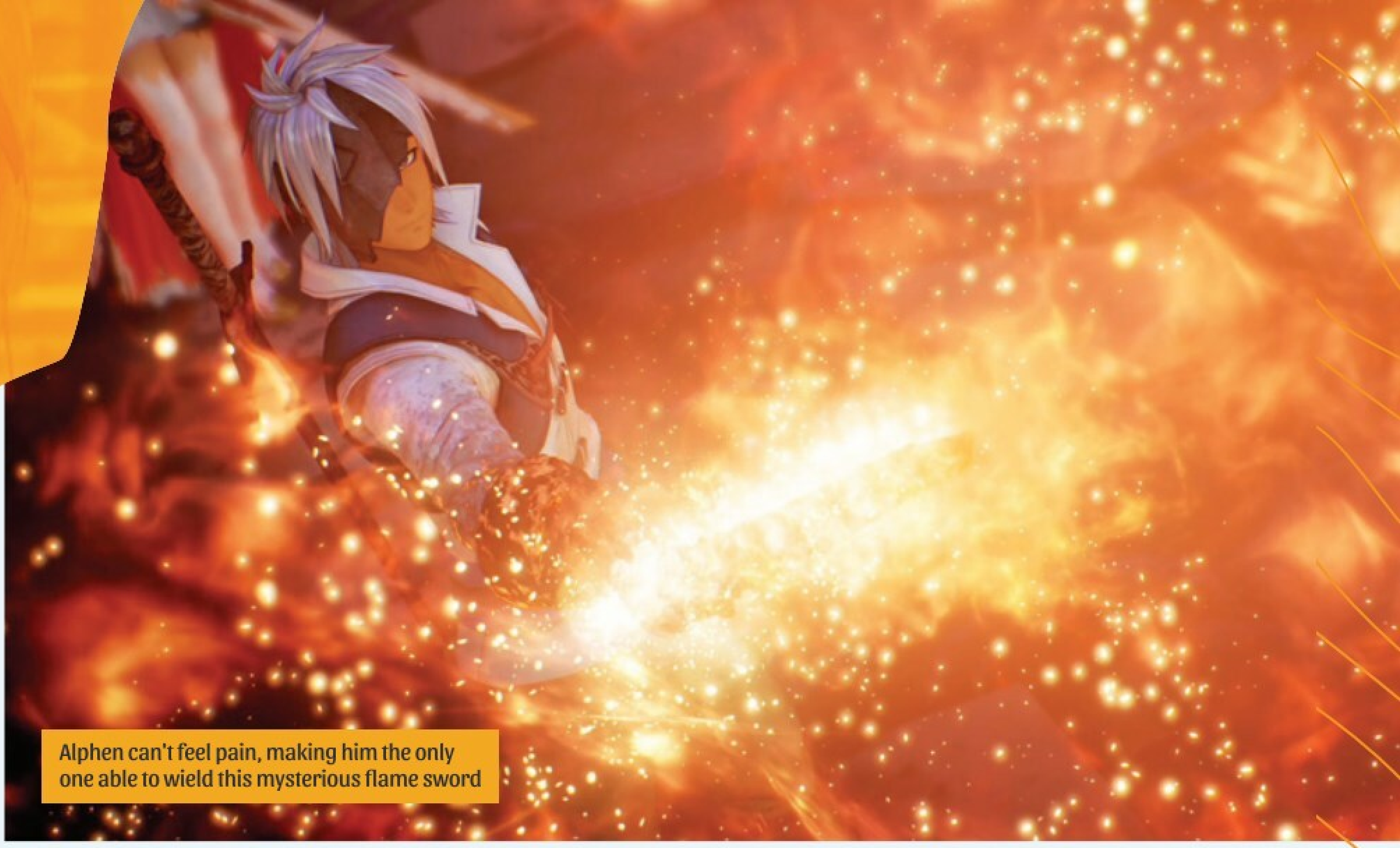
by Kimberley Wallace

From Grandia to Wild Arms, we've seen our share of RPG franchises vanish over the years, especially as evolving technology brought an increased emphasis on innovation and big budgets to dazzle. The Japanese RPG development scene once dominated platforms, truly reaching its peak during the PS2's life cycle. But as development costs continued to rise and studios struggled to get gamers' attention, many franchises couldn't secure a future or had to look toward mobile and portable ventures to carry on. Konami disbanded its Suikoden team, juggernaut genre leaders like Final Fantasy struggled with its direction, and Atlus was just starting to bloom but had yet to break into the mainstream.

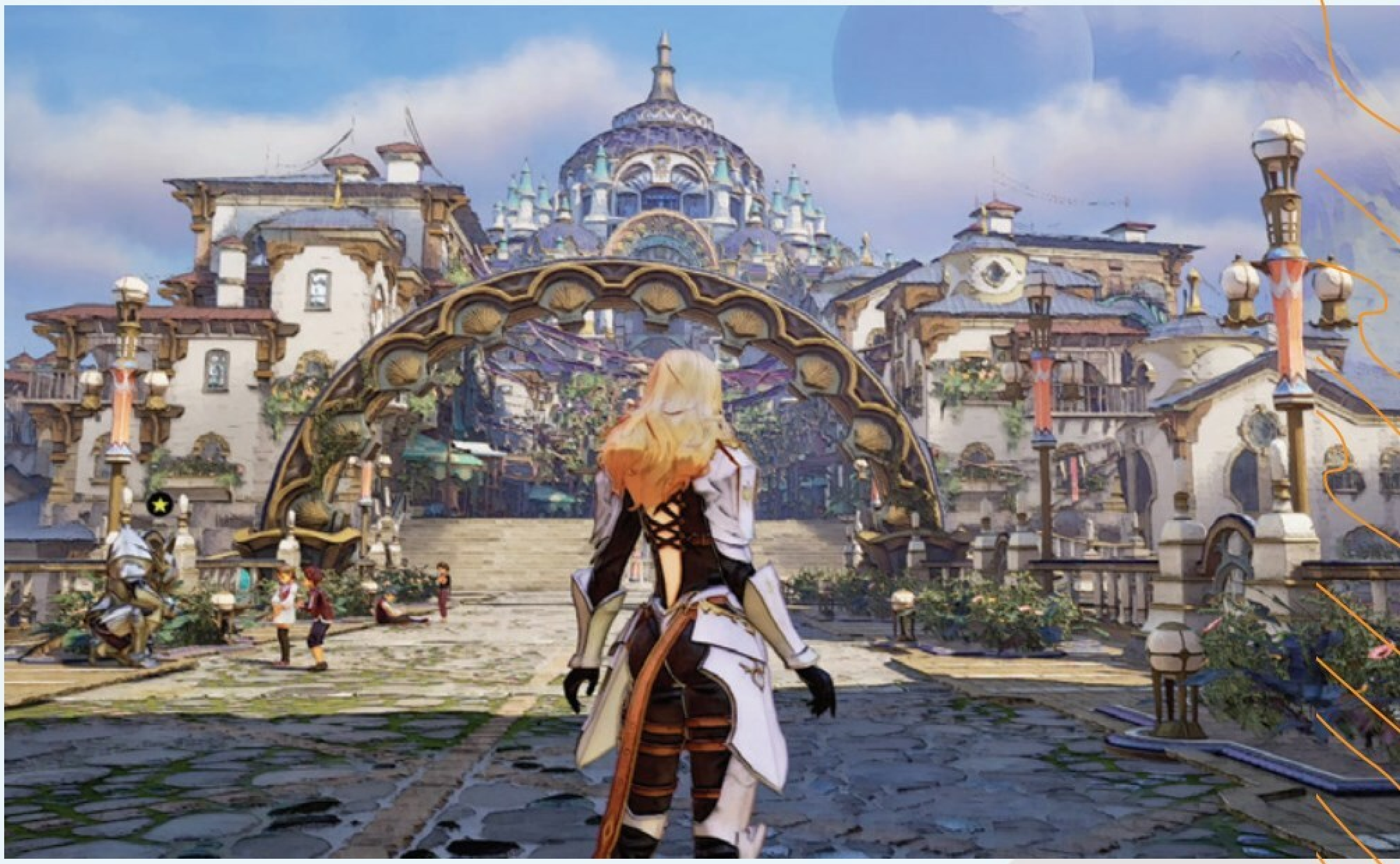
In trying times, it's said only the strong survive. In game development, it's a lot more complicated, but there's usually something distinct that keeps a franchise ticking. And Bandai Namco's Tales series has undoubtedly marched on, recently hitting its 25-year milestone. It has earned a place as one of the most popular RPG franchises in Japan, right behind Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest, while making a solid name for itself in the west. Tales' "something special" is in the memorable bonding moments between its characters and a combo-driven, action battle system that recalls the depth of fighting games. The series wears its anime inspiration on its sleeve and taps into philosophical issues about human nature and how people manage to persevere in the worst of circumstances.

Big battles and big character payoffs have served the series well, but it hasn't always been smooth sailing. Tales' last few entries haven't had the same "wow" factor as popular titles like Symphonia, Abyss, or Vesperia. If anything, the series has become stuck in a rut. Bandai Namco isn't ignoring this criticism, boldly calling Tales of Arise a "reinvention" of the franchise. The challenge before the Tales team isn't easy: It must delicately toe the line between retaining elements that fans cherish while also evolving the formula in novel and intriguing ways.

Tales of Arise marks the most drastic change to the franchise in over a decade and is the first complete entry without longtime producer Hideo Baba, who last worked in that role on Tales of Zestiria and remained a supervisor on the last entry, Tales of Berseria. With new leadership, change is afoot. For Arise, Yusuke Tomizawa, who previously worked on Bandai's God Eater series, takes the role as producer, and Hirokazu Kagawa, who was a battle programmer on Tales of Graces and Berseria, is the director. As for



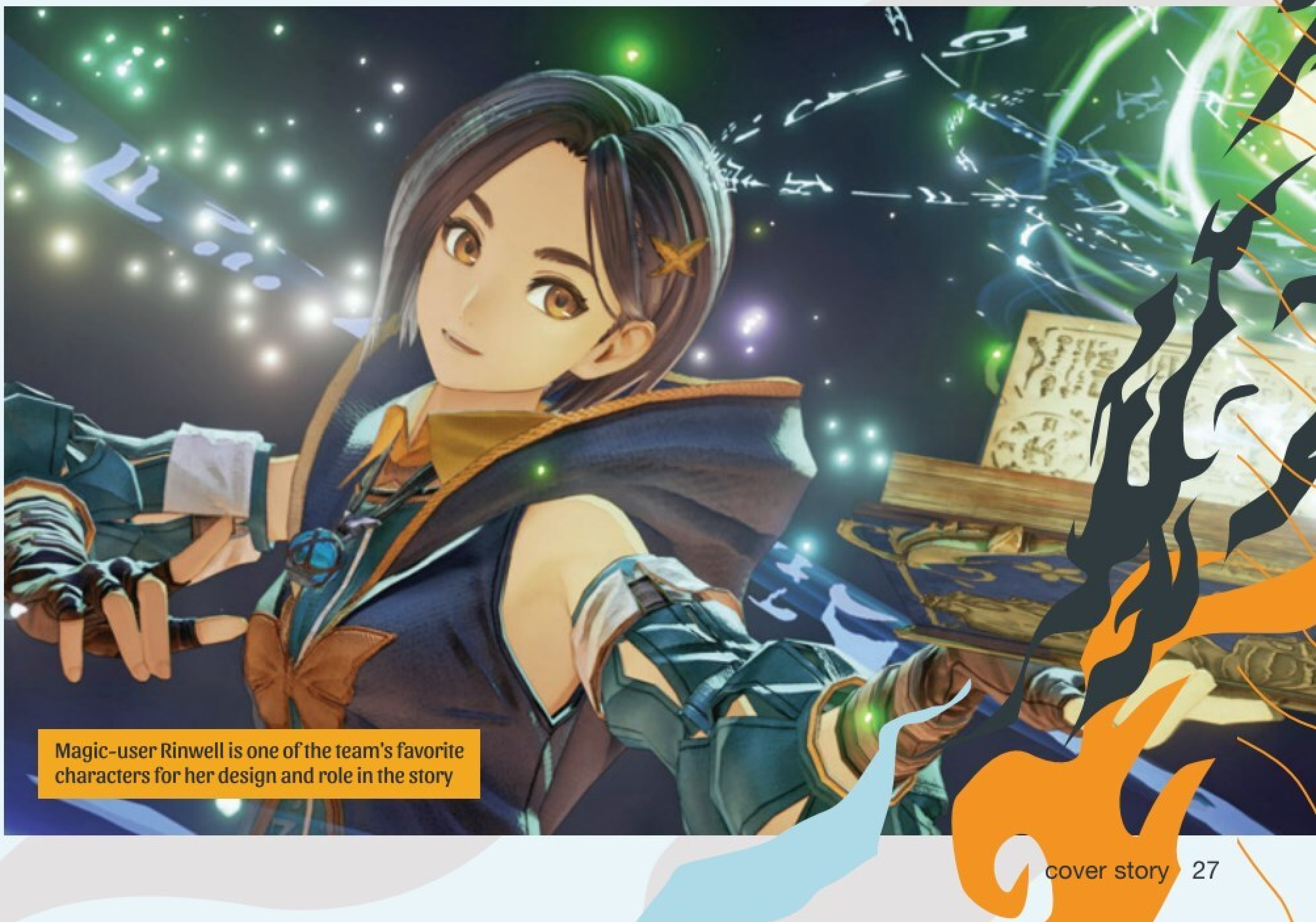
Alphen can't feel pain, making him the only one able to wield this mysterious flame sword



the new, more mature art style, Minoru Iwamoto, an artist on Zestiria and Berseria, is the art director and character designer shaping the game's look.

The importance of this entry and what it means for the future of the franchise isn't lost on Bandai Namco. "This is a huge revival after 25 years of the Tales series, and we really wanted to bring a Tales title to the next level," says Tomizawa. "We wanted to elevate and push the envelope. [To do that,] we wanted to focus on really brushing up the quality, making sure it's polished. And also, for the game concept, we want it to be really exciting for both new players and for existing fans, preserving what everybody has loved about Tales but also appealing to a new audience."

For our cover story, I played the first chapter of Tales of Arise. I also chatted with the three aforementioned key members of the development team to discover exactly what this reinvention means. Read on to learn how they're mixing the old with several new tweaks to rekindle the magic of earlier entries.



Magic-user Rinwell is one of the team's favorite characters for her design and role in the story

A DARK OPENING TO SHOW THE STAKES

Tales of Arise follows two different characters from two very different worlds who must enact change for a better future. To understand what's at stake in this adventure, you must learn more about the worlds of Rena and Dahna and how they're connected. The technologically advanced Rena has ruled over Dahna for the past 300 years, but it wasn't always that way. The two once coexisted, with Rena being regarded as a paradise and domain for the gods, while the lush Dahna was once believed to be "indestructible" and "everlasting." Then Rena proved that to be untrue, using its superior technology to wreak havoc and nearly obliterate Dahna. In an instant, the land's beauty was stripped, with Rena depleting its natural resources and forcing its inhabitants into slavery.

When Rena conquered Dahna, its leaders split the land into five distinct realms, giving each leader a chance to rule how they saw fit. Tales of Arise's first chapter focuses on Orbus Calaglia, which is governed by a tyrant named Balseph, the lord of the Fire Master Core. He's about as big and fiery as you'd expect in appearance, and the barren wasteland he commands is full of scorched terrain, oppressive heat, and dust storms. It is here that our story begins.

Common themes in previous Tales games include nature and coexistence, touching on racism, loss, and societal decline. However, Arise's opening is a brutal and frightening look at what happens when power and greed get out of hand, as you watch the Dahnan people suffer as slaves under the ruthless oppression of the Renan soldiers. In tattered clothes, the Dahnans perform hard labor, are told to "hurry up!" and face routine beatings. Dead bodies litter the streets. Some slaves are just children, berated and threatened with violence for not working hard enough. As one is about to get a lashing for not pushing well enough, our protagonist Alphen steps in to take the hit.

Alphen comes from Dahna and is a slave himself but has no memory of his past, except for weird dreams haunting him. He is simply referred to as "Iron Mask," with his helmet covering his entire face. It's worth noting that in promotional pictures, we've only seen part of his face covered. I won't spoil anything but will say this touch helps further cement Alphen's insignificance as a slave and his place in the world. This moment is also where we learn that Alphen can't feel pain; he's bleeding from the sword strike and unaware of it. As Alphen gets fixed up, the doctor treating him sums up our hero's

Bandai Namco confirmed we'll visit both Rena and Dahna, but due to spoilers, wouldn't confirm how much time we'll spend in either one

backstory: "No face, no memories … unable to feel pain, yet only too eager to take on everybody else's."

These opening scenes are not easy to watch, and I was surprised by how hopeless and brutal things got, but the team assured me the game is not all doom and gloom. "Tales has been known to have these two distinct sides to the story," Tomizawa says. "On the outside, it looks pretty and bright; it seems like a happy story, but when you look inside, there are a lot of dark elements. [For the first chapter], I think you've really experienced that darker side of Tales. We did position that as the starting point for this story, but without going into any spoilers, there are happy moments – those moments that may make you smile [like] the interaction between characters and their funny banter. There's a lot of that stuff sprinkled in, so it's not all dark all the way through."

The dark beginning doesn't turn me off from the game; it motivates me to get to the bottom of things and find a way to set it right. Tales of Arise sets some high stakes for Alphen; he's not in it to advance his cause but to change the way the world works. It's admirable from the get-go, and seeing this type of motivation behind the character's journey helps sell me on the adventure. I'm rooting for Alphen, but things are only about to get more complicated for him.

THE TALES LEGACY

The Tales series got its start in 1995 with Tales of Phantasia. With 16 mainline titles, two direct sequels, and numerous spinoffs that include several crossovers for mobile and an MMORPG, there's a breadth of games with the Tales name. That doesn't even include the manga and anime adaptations. Since 2008, a convention called the Tales of Festival has fans coming together to celebrate the series, often with Bandai Namco revealing new info. Did we mention there's an entire floor dedicated to Tales merchandise in Akihabara's Kotobukiya store? The series is a force in Japan, often regarded in the same tier as Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest.

While considered more of a niche RPG series in the West, the audience has continued to grow and turn heads, thanks to its beautifully animated visuals, fantastic action combat, and significant character interactions. The most recognizable entry is GameCube's Tales of Symphonia, which struck a chord and brought the series into mainstream consciousness, becoming the best-selling Tales title worldwide to date. Outstanding entries, such as Tales of the Abyss and Tales of Vesperia, only further bolstered the series' reputation. Since then, Tales has consistently put out new titles, but Tales of Arise marks the most intense and vocal attempt at revamping the series. 25 years later, Bandai Namco isn't taking anything for granted.

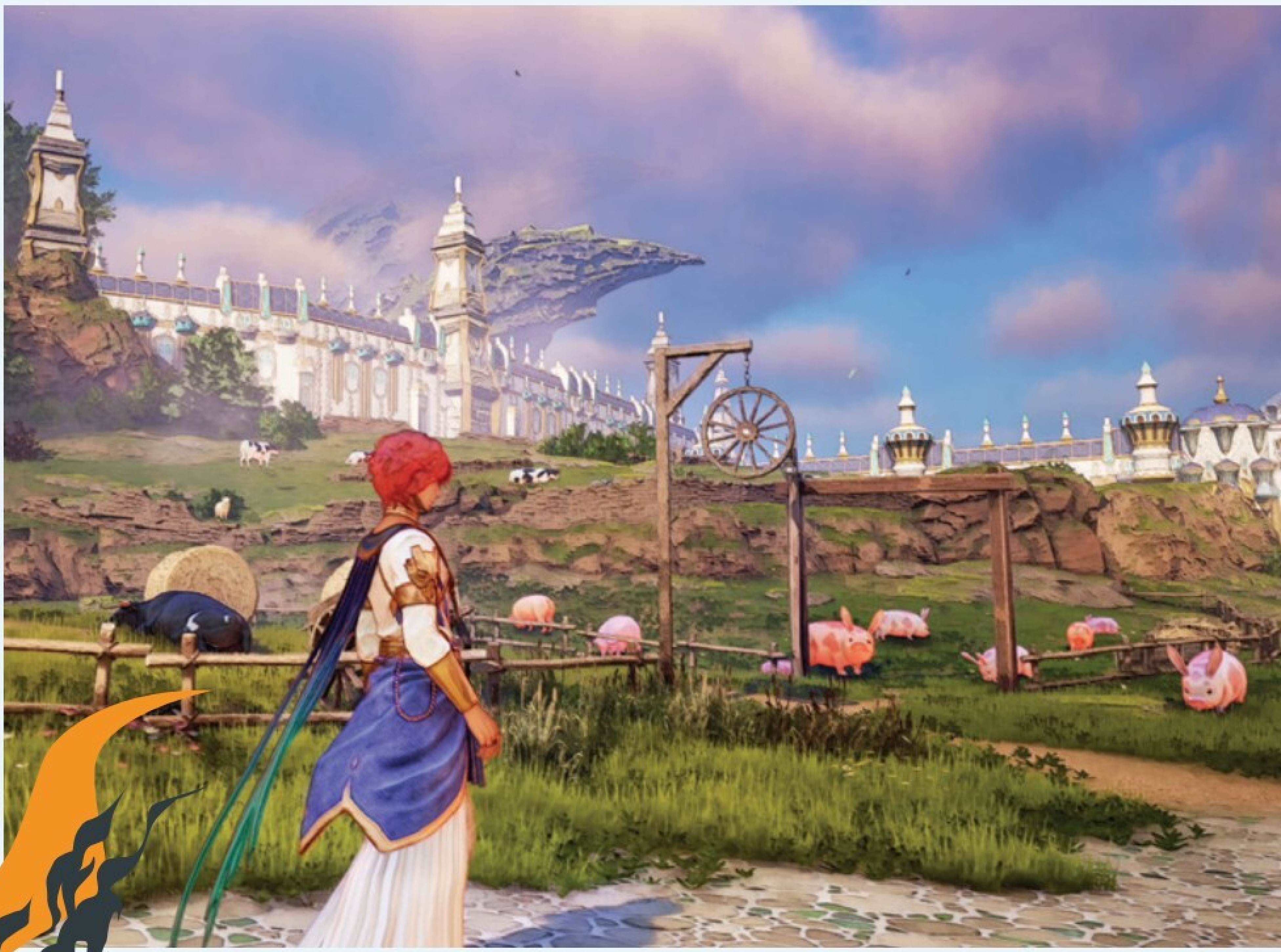
A CHANCE MEETING, OPPOSITES UNITE

An unexpected explosion on a Renan train introduces us to Tales of Arise's other protagonist, Shionne. Shionne's hands are chained above her head as she helplessly hangs above the wreckage in her cart. A man uses a shovel to knock away her chains, touching her to see if she's okay. Electrical thorns engulf his body, killing him on the spot. Where Alphen can't feel pain, Shionne can only cause it. Shionne runs for her life, knowing there's no way to right this mistake. She has a curse, where anybody who touches her ends up like this man.

In Shionne's escape and avoidance of touching anything else, she jumps from a cliff, falling into a resource cart of a different train, on which Alphen happens to be working. As Renan soldiers catch up to the cart and threaten her, Shionne tells Alphen to run, but he instead kicks out their feet, helping Shionne and stealing the cart. An intense chase scene ensues, with Alphen using a pipe to defend himself against soldiers twice his size for a woman he knows nothing about. A man who has been watching from afar jumps onto the train to help Alphen fight back. It ends in a massive explosion, with the group narrowly escaping.

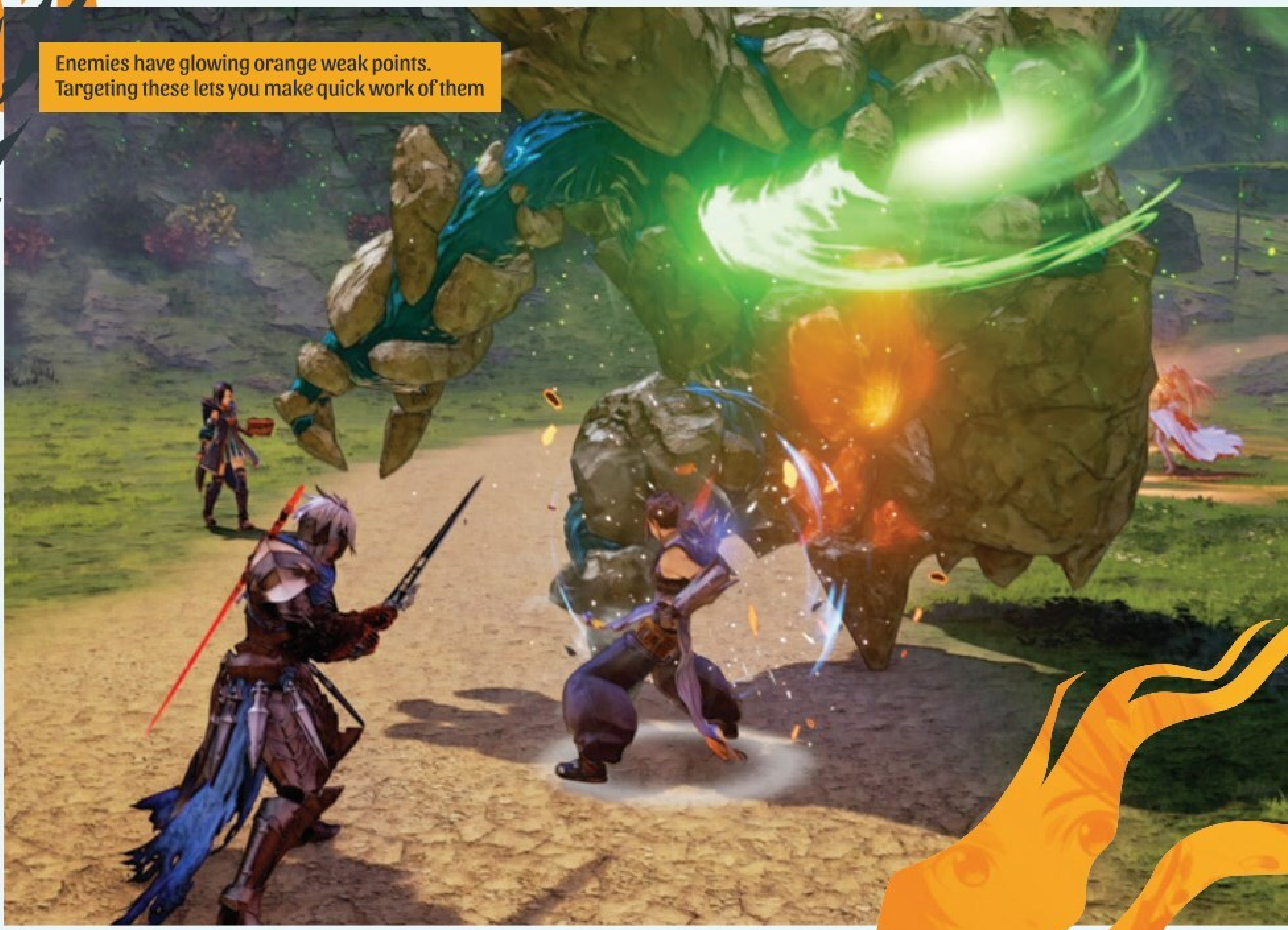
This first interaction is the start of a beautiful, banter-filled partnership between Shionne and Alphen. While Alphen is the game's main protagonist, his relationship with Shionne is front and center. "We really want to place the focus on the relationship and dynamic between Shionne and Alphen," Tomizawa says. "They come from two very different worlds. They're almost like polar opposites. Alphen can't feel pain, but Shionne is the one that actually inflicts pain. I think that dynamic is really easy for the audience to understand, and it serves as a good starting line for them to [imagine] what can happen from that."

The scene cuts to Lord Balseph, who isn't happy about these recent events, and becomes more agitated as another lord from a different region taunts him over his troubles. Balseph is after Shionne. Players learn about the Crown Contest, where the five lords of each Dahnan region compete to amass the most astral (magic) energy. Every region has a different elemental variant of astral energy, but the slaves are the ones who siphon it, meaning every leader is going to great lengths (and abuse) to win. The victor is crowned the new sovereign, meaning they rule over both Rena and Dahna. Outside of the advanced technology, the first chapter keeps much of Rena shrouded in mystery,



ABANDONING CO-OP

The Tales series earned a lot of fanfare for allowing couch co-op. All your buddies had to do was plug in a controller, and they could control another party member on the battlefield. Tales of Arise will not have this feature. It wasn't a decision that came lightly. "It is something we really debated," says producer Yusuke Tomizawa. "It is an action battle game. [Local co-op] is a very enticing thing to consider, but at the end of the day, we decided not to include it. One of the main attractions of the battle and combat system is the animation effects and cinematics – the really awesome visuals. Our worry was that if we incorporate co-op, with the cameras, we'd have to show multiple characters at once. That was something that posed a huge difficulty from what we wanted to accomplish with the battle system; we wanted to make sure that it looked very visually pleasing and satisfying. We thought that having a co-op system where camera angles are switching back and forth, and maybe even like split screening, and stuff like that, we didn't really want that to ruin the aesthetic that we were going for, and so that is why we arrived at the decision."

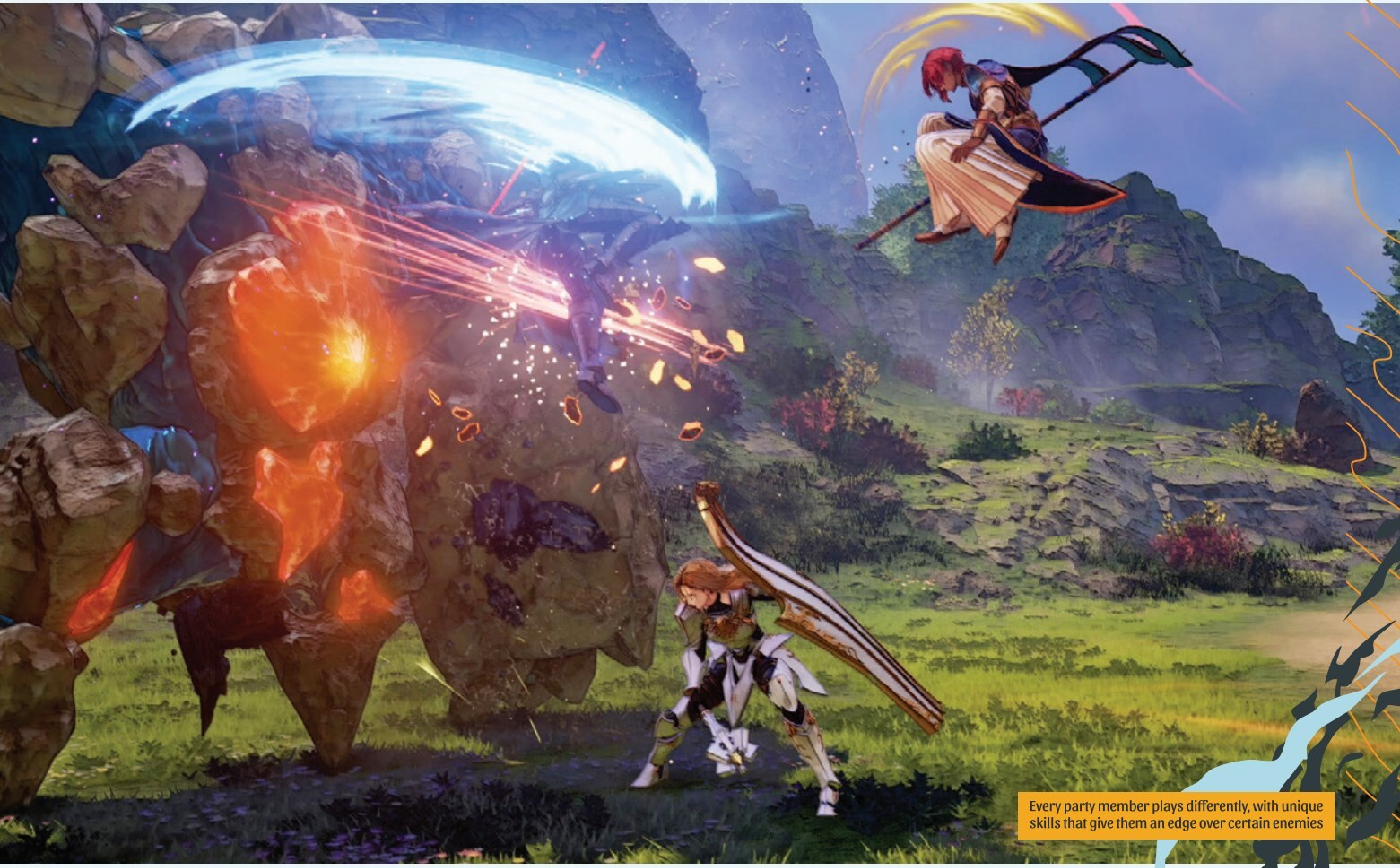


Enemies have glowing orange weak points. Targeting these lets you make quick work of them but it is treated like a heaven of sorts, visible in the sky above Dahna.

Alphen and Shionne get rescued by the Crimson Crows, a resistance group hoping to liberate Calaglia from Rena. Alphen is surprised he hasn't heard of them, but he's more worried when he hears Shionne is being interrogated by their leader, Zephyr, who helped them on the train. Shionne is from Rena, which doesn't exactly win her any supporters. A Crow member calls her "bright eyes," since Renans can use astral artes (magic), and when they do, their eyes light up blue. It's not the last time Shionne will feel the ire from others due to her origin.

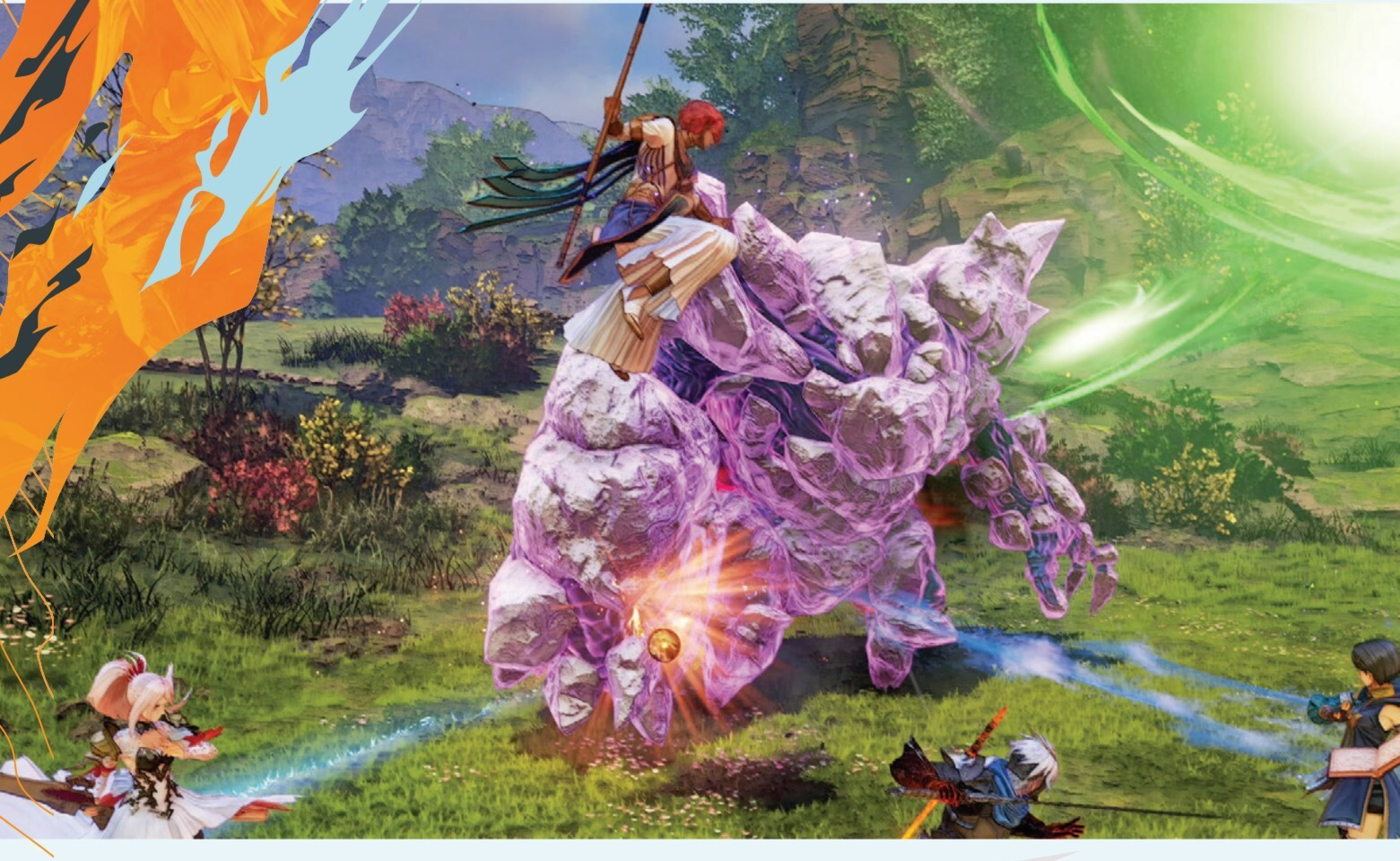
Throughout the story, Shionne is torn between her homeland and learning more about their evils. You can tell she looks down upon Dahnans a bit and isn't entirely thrilled to be working with Alphen, only doing it out of necessity. However, there's much more to her than meets the eye, and how she makes choices and sees things in the two opposing worlds will change as the journey progresses. "She's rebelling against her own faction … but she's wanted from both sides, from her own people and the opposition," Tomizawa explains. "She's kind of this outlier. She's very much on her own. She does have this strong sense of self and identity, and she may come across as [harsh] to everybody else. But through her adventure with her allies and friends, that does start to change a little bit. You will see some changes with her sense of identity and her beliefs."

Before the Crimson Crows can further question Shionne about why Balseph wants her, Renan soldiers hellbent on retrieving Shionne attack the safehouse in the abandoned mine. From here, the new and improved combat and exploration take center stage.



Every party member plays differently, with unique skills that give them an edge over certain enemies

Zephyr is the leader of the Crimson Crows. He's not a permanent party member, but will help out the group



BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO THE ACTION

A strength of the Tales series has always been its fast and fluid action combat focused on chaining up combos and pulling off flashy moves. That isn't changing, but Bandai Namco has made some tweaks to make the action more inviting to newcomers. Pulling off bigger moves doesn't require as many inputs, and there's more strategy in how you use characters and their special skills. "We wanted to make sure that we didn't raise the difficulty too much with the combat system," says Kagawa. "In previous titles, we had these combos links, where you link up combos with other characters, and you had to execute them well to succeed. I found that challenging. I mean, I can do it now because I've had more time with it, but as a new player, I would find it a little bit difficult. We sat down and really asked ourselves, 'How can we make this easier for newcomers and players in general?'"

The result is a streamlined system with more strategy in how and when you use characters' powers to exploit enemy weak points. You still swap between regular attacks and your artes: special moves that cost points to use. Up to three regular attacks can be chained together, but this limit can be increased once you learn specific skills. Jumping and attacking in the air also causes characters to unleash different attacks, which is a nice touch and adds some variety to how you play and what moves you want to chain together.

Four total party members can be on the field at once, with two others in support spots. You control one character at a time but can swap in an instant. The controls are a little different than in previous games; your regular attacks are executed using the right bumper, while all your artes are on the face buttons. The right trigger acts as your defend/evade. If you time your evade/guard just right, you perform a perfect evasion/guard, nullifying any damage and giving you the opportunity to counterattack by pressing attack.

You have two things to keep track of as you fight: AP (artes points) and CP (cure points). The former is all your special, damage-dealing attacks, while the latter is your support and healing artes. New to this entry are boost strikes – potent, one-hit-kill co-op attacks that are executed through extended combat. These are more likely to occur at low enemy HP and higher combo counts.

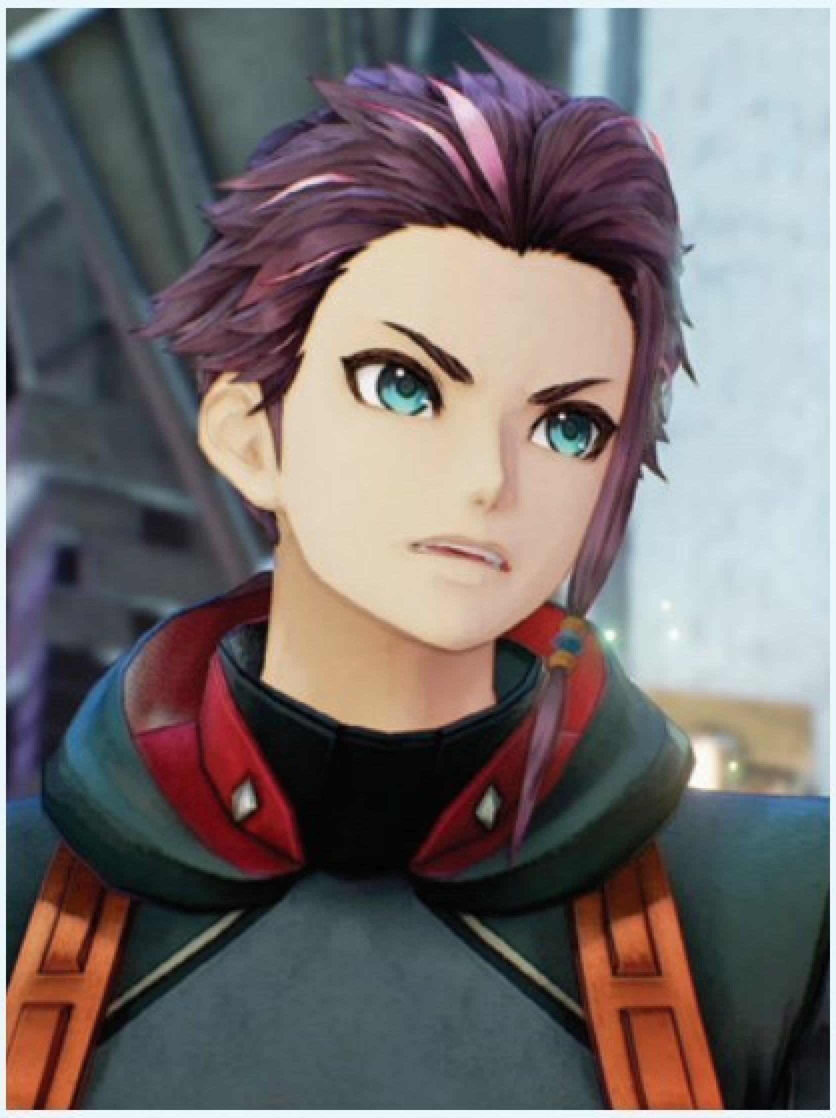
The environments hold plenty of places to take in the scenery. Characters will often have interactions at these points

In addition, every character also has their own unique boost attack (different from boost strikes), which you can use in battle with the directional pad. Filling up a boost gauge, which charges over time by landing attacks and counters on enemies, enables you to activate these. Each character's boost attack is more effective against certain enemies than others, giving you more reasons to experiment with different heroes and play styles. For instance, Shionne's boost attack, Wing Clip, fires numerous beams of light from the muzzle of her rifle, dealing damage and temporarily restricting aerial foes from flying. Each character also has a unique perk. "They follow the personality of the character," Kagawa explains. "For example, Law can become stronger the longer he doesn't get hit, and that goes with his personality."

For those worried it won't feel like a Tales game or things will be too easy, fret not. These new additions simply offer more to think about on the battlefield than mashing buttons at opportune times. Combos have diminishing returns if you repeat the same arte multiple times for four actions. This limitation forces you to try different combinations and not rely on the same tactics. In my hands-on time, the combat still had that smooth, intense Tales feel, but I appreciated the new strategic elements, which forced me to think ahead and experiment much more than I had in previous Tales games.

According to the team, this was intentional; it wanted to involve the player more in the action, having them react more on the battlefield than grinding levels to win. "Previous Tales [games] were very heavily focused on stats," Kagawa says. "It was really just a race to see how fast you can maximize your stats. But we really want to make sure that the Tales series and Tales of Arise are action games. We wanted to make sure that the players knew clearly what was happening to them, and also if they were defeated, or if they got attacked by something really big or something really hurtful, that they can really experience and feel that."

The world feels grand, with alternative paths and plenty of goodies to find



THE POTENTIAL FOR A PHOTO MODE

Tales of Arise's world is full of beautiful scenic points, making it seem like a good candidate for a dedicated photo mode. As more games include this feature, we were curious if Bandai Namco gave any thought to having a photo mode to capture the characters and their journey. Producer Yusuke Tomizawa confirmed a photo mode function does not currently exist in the game, reiterating that the scenic points were created for character interactions and to reveal more about them and the world. However, the question did get him thinking. "Since you're asking, right now I'm thinking, 'Hmm, a photo mode is actually something that's quite sought after, we have to think about that,'" Tomizawa says. "I'm getting the impression that there is an actual demand for a photo mode, so I'm going to put a mental note and take that home. But it is our hope that when this game releases, we have so many people, particularly streamers, get their hands on it and share it with their audience, so that they can share these beautiful moments together. One of our biggest hopes is to share those experiences with even more people."

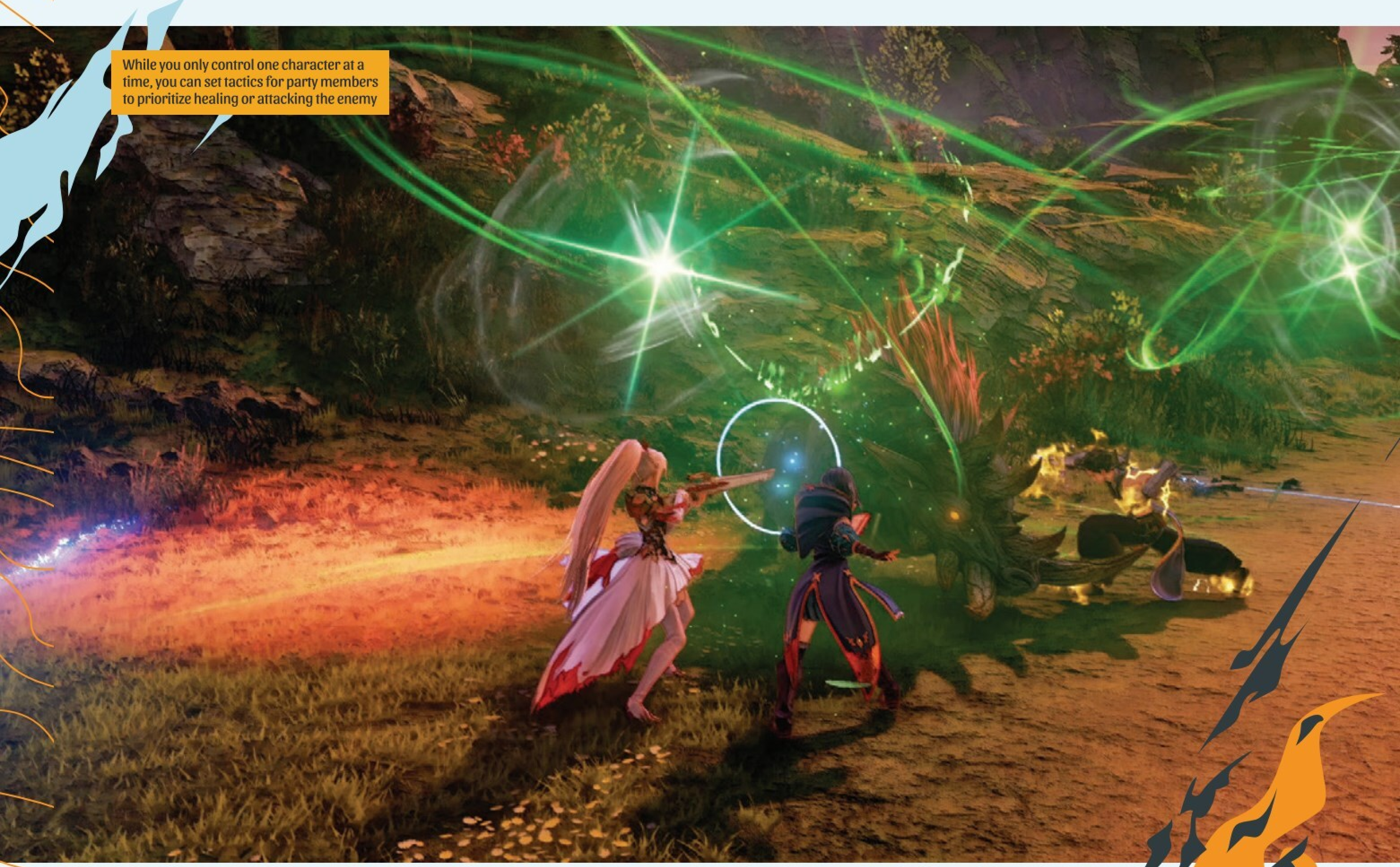
A NEW WAY TO BUILD CHARACTERS

How you learn new skills has been altered to offer more customization over your characters. Better yet, the new system implements the legacy "Titles" feature. Titles, names that can be assigned to your characters once unlocked by certain game events, have been a part of the series from the beginning, first appearing in Tales of Phantasia on the SNES. Since then, they've been used in different ways throughout the series, such as providing special effects or abilities to party members when equipped.

They're becoming much more meaningful in Tales of Arise by getting tied directly into the progression system. Titles, like "Escape Artist" or "Speedy Chef," open access to new abilities and stat boosts for characters, which you unlock by investing the skill points you earn and leveling up. Every ability costs a certain amount of skill points, giving you options like gaining new arte like Sonic Thurst, speeding up the charge on a special attack, or KO prevention. Every Title has five different abilities associated with it, and you get a bonus stat boost for unlocking all abilities within one. You can swap between various Titles or focus on one at a time.

"This portion of the game is really designed so that the player can have some freedom in making their own decisions," Kagawa says. "Maybe they'll have a difficult time deciding, 'Okay, what's more optimal?' 'What's good?' 'Where should I [focus]?' And that's exactly the process that we want people to go through. Whatever choice that they make, it's designed so that it can fit various play styles. You can really fit it to your liking and still be successful."

As someone who loves to build characters, this system has me excited for the customization potential. I stopped at the screen many times, contemplating if I should save up my SP for KO prevention so I could withstand a deadly attack or if I should get access to more artes to have better combo options. I even wondered if I should be focusing on just one Title to get the stat bonus, but I kept being swayed by the variety of mixing and matching from a slew of different ones. This system has a lot of potential, but time will tell how far-reaching and satisfying it is. As with many other elements, Bandai Namco is trying new things, and they seem like intelligent innovations.



While you only control one character at a time, you can set tactics for party members to prioritize healing or attacking the enemy

TAKING DUNGEONS, BOSSES, AND EXPLORATION TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Engaging combat and progression only go so far; you need exciting venues and memorable enemies to capitalize on these features. Bandai Namco knows RPG fans expect certain elements out of the genre and worked especially hard to make exploration more interesting. Tales of Arise's world feels much more expansive to explore, and it's not just in the size or scope, but in how it's structured and the various things to uncover in each space. Go off the beaten path, and you can locate supplies for crafting, ingredients for cooking, or even treasure chests packed with new equipment. Owls are hidden in the world, and tracking them down provides cosmetic upgrades, such as putting silly hats and glasses on your party members. Optional minibosses also roam the land, offering great rewards in rare items and SP, but they are tough, so you need to head in prepared.

The series has received criticism for big, empty spaces in the past, and it looks like the developers took that feedback to heart. My favorite addition is all the alternative paths to avoid enemies, stumble upon rare chests, or discover good scenic views. You can now jump and swim, which also opens new ways to explore and see the world beyond just climbing up vines.

Bandai Namco takes a different approach to creating its world map, making character moments the priority. "It's not exactly an open-world structure, but it's not exactly linear," Tomizawa says. "You can always go back to previous villages and different maps, and there's always sub-quests and side quests that you can do. You can discover various activities when you reach certain places on the map. So, for example, when you reach a cliff top or something, and it's beautiful, vast scenery, a character will react to the actions that you're taking and the places that you're going."

For Bandai Namco, exploring the world means giving you a chance to learn more about the characters. "The center of everything in the world-map design is always the character building and revealing more to the player about the character, whether that's dialogue, actions, or different activities. So, we always make sure that we can portray the character by building the world around them."

This philosophy extends to your time in dungeons, where Kagawa said to expect more banter and interactions between characters that add comedic relief. The final, big dungeon in the first chapter is called Glanymede Castle, a vast structure and a culmination of the fiery region and the style of its ruthless leader, Balseph. I'm trying to find the route through a colossal tower housing a sizeable flaming pit in the middle for good measure. Multiple paths, rooms to open, and enemies crawl the space.

Blazing walls block certain places, but I can spend CP to melt the flames. This exploration leads to finding better items and equipment but using CP means draining my healing resources. Kagawa says not every dungeon makes you choose between using CP, but a good portion do. "The idea behind the CP resource is that we really want to make the player think about their choices and formulate strategies," Kagawa says. "Coming up with a game plan is something that we believe is a very enjoyable and satisfying experience. We're making the player put their choices on a pendulum or scale. Are you going to use the CP for battle and survivability, or are you going to use it more for exploration and item finding?"

I like this feature, as the risk and reward part makes exploration more enticing. I enjoy testing how far I can go, and I've never been able to turn down a treasure chest. But as I progress in the dungeon, I take a more measured approach as my CP dwindles. My goal for the dungeon is to locate a key and use it to switch the elevators back on; I get so distracted by all the different rooms and item-hunting that I'm guessing I've spent more time here than a lot of players who will just race to the objectives.

MORE ON CRAFTING AND COOKING

Crafting and cooking have been a part of previous Tales games, but their roles have varied. In this installment, cooking is mainly a way to give your characters stat boosts before entering battles and to open new scenes, but it's not required. "Cooking is there to enhance your experience in terms of exploration, dungeon crawling, and battles," says director Hirokazu Kagawa. "It does give you a leg up in those situations. But it's not essential that you have to do this in order to get through the boss. It's not designed to that level."

Crafting has a much more significant role in the game, which can be used to create weapons or accessories for your weapons. "For weapons, you defeat enemies and collect materials from them, and with accessories, you need to find special items in the dungeons to craft them," Kagawa explains. The team wanted an easy-to-understand and straightforward system, but it did add something to keep crafting diehards, who want the best weapons, busy. "There is a bit of a random element to the results of your crafting," Kagawa says. "As you craft items, you can also enhance them, power them up, and acquire new skills or different powers that go on to these weapons and accessories. They actually have random results so there will be an aspect of trying to craft the ideal weapon by trying to craft over and over again to get your ideal weapon in place."

Dungeons in the Tales games have usually had some form of puzzles, whether moving boxes or tapping switches in a particular order, but recent entries have dialed back on those elements. When I asked about puzzles, Kagawa had an interesting answer: "There will be some puzzle elements that might be familiar to you if you played the past entries," he says. "But we did want to make sure that these puzzles didn't feel out of place within the overall context of the world. And so we really were careful in designing these puzzles to make sure that they feel realistic and believable and that they're not completely removed or feel foreign to the world." Kagawa also confirmed that since Tales of Arise's characters can swim and jump, the team also incorporated that into some of the puzzle-solving elements of dungeons.

Reaching the end of the dungeon brings me face-to-face with Balseph and answers some questions about his interest in Shionne. I won't spoil anything, except to say this boss battle goes to unexpected places and ends the chapter on a bang. The series has had its exciting bosses through the years, but this certainly ups the ante and challenge. It puts me on the edge of my seat as I pull out all stops to survive the onslaught from a sadistic man wielding a giant axe ... then I get one more fiery surprise that makes for a memorable showdown you'll have to experience for yourself.

Kagawa says the boss battles are where players will be forced to tap into the strategic decision-making of the battle system. "In boss battles, we really want to make sure the players feel the struggle and the hardships in being in the two opposing worlds, Rena and Dahna. Part of making these big boss battles difficult is to really capture that struggle that is very prevalent in the story." If this fight is any indication of what's in store, I can't wait to see what else awaits.

PAVING A NEW FUTURE

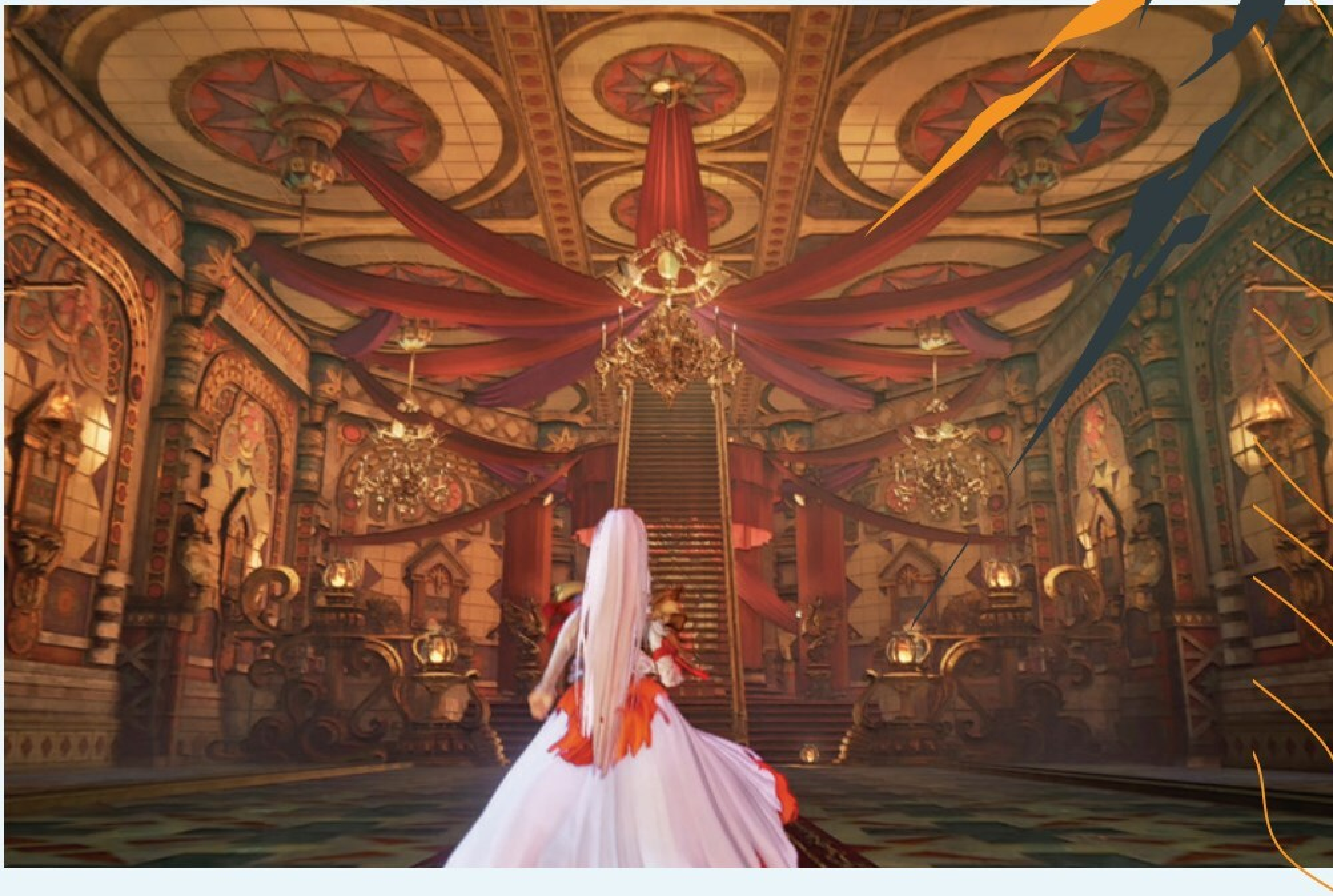
Reinventing a longtime franchise is a tall order and comes with plenty of risks, but Bandai Namco knows Tales is at a crossroads, and now is the time for a change. "Tales is a long-running series, so it's really easy to get in the habit of recycling from old titles," Kagawa says. "But for this one, we really made it a point to re-envision the game from the ground up and make sure that it's a unique experience that both core fans and newcomers can enjoy."

During this cover story, the pressure to

expand its audience and reach more people worldwide came up quite a bit, but just as many times, Bandai Namco brought up its existing fans. The team hopes Tales of Arise captures what they adore about the series while also giving them new things with which to fall in love. "Making the game accessible and enjoyable for everybody around the world was a huge challenge for us," Iwamoto says. "I think we've delivered something great that we can feel confident about."

"As a producer, I am the one that imposes those challenges on my colleagues, but this was for the desire to really think about and really care about the future of the brand," Tomizawa adds. "We thought that this evolution, as we call it, was a necessary step into really crafting the future of this series. [However,] I think just making changes or just evolving is not the whole answer. It's not as simple as just, 'evolve, evolve, evolve.' It's a huge balancing act between evolving, but also making sure we don't really alienate our core fans."

Tomizawa says the team is looking forward to hearing feedback once the game debuts worldwide on September 10. "Even right now, a lot of people are talking, and I see various emotions on various places in the scale," he says. "There's some people who are very worried about where this is going. And there's some people who are really excited and very optimistic about this game. We realize that both sides of this spectrum exist. We really take those opinions and feelings very seriously. And we want to continue to receive feedback and opinions and take it with us as we go to further develop the Tales series. Obviously, we can't make any changes now. But we're very confident there'll be something special for everybody."



Since Tales of Arise began development in 2012, it was originally envisioned for PS4 and Xbox One. However, you can still expect some upgrades if you decide to play on PS5 or Xbox Series X/S, especially in the visual department. "When I play it on the PS5, I can clearly see a difference when I play in 4K, just the vividness and crispness of the graphics," Tomizawa says. For gameplay, Tomizawa says to expect more fluid transitions when you go from the field to battle. "If you're really looking for a smooth gameplay experience, I would definitely recommend playing on the next-gen consoles. To bring up a specific example, and this is on PS5 specifically, but you have the haptic feedback on the controller. And haptic feedback is something that we also tuned with the game to sort of interact and sync with the game."

Tales of Arise takes some promising steps forward for the franchise, but it's impossible to know if it will all come together in a satisfying way. For an RPG franchise that's stayed in the game for the past 25 years, it's hard not to root for it, and what we have seen makes that enthusiasm feel justified.

Want to learn more about Tales of Arise and other RPGs on the horizon? Visit our hub at gameinformer.com/RPG2021

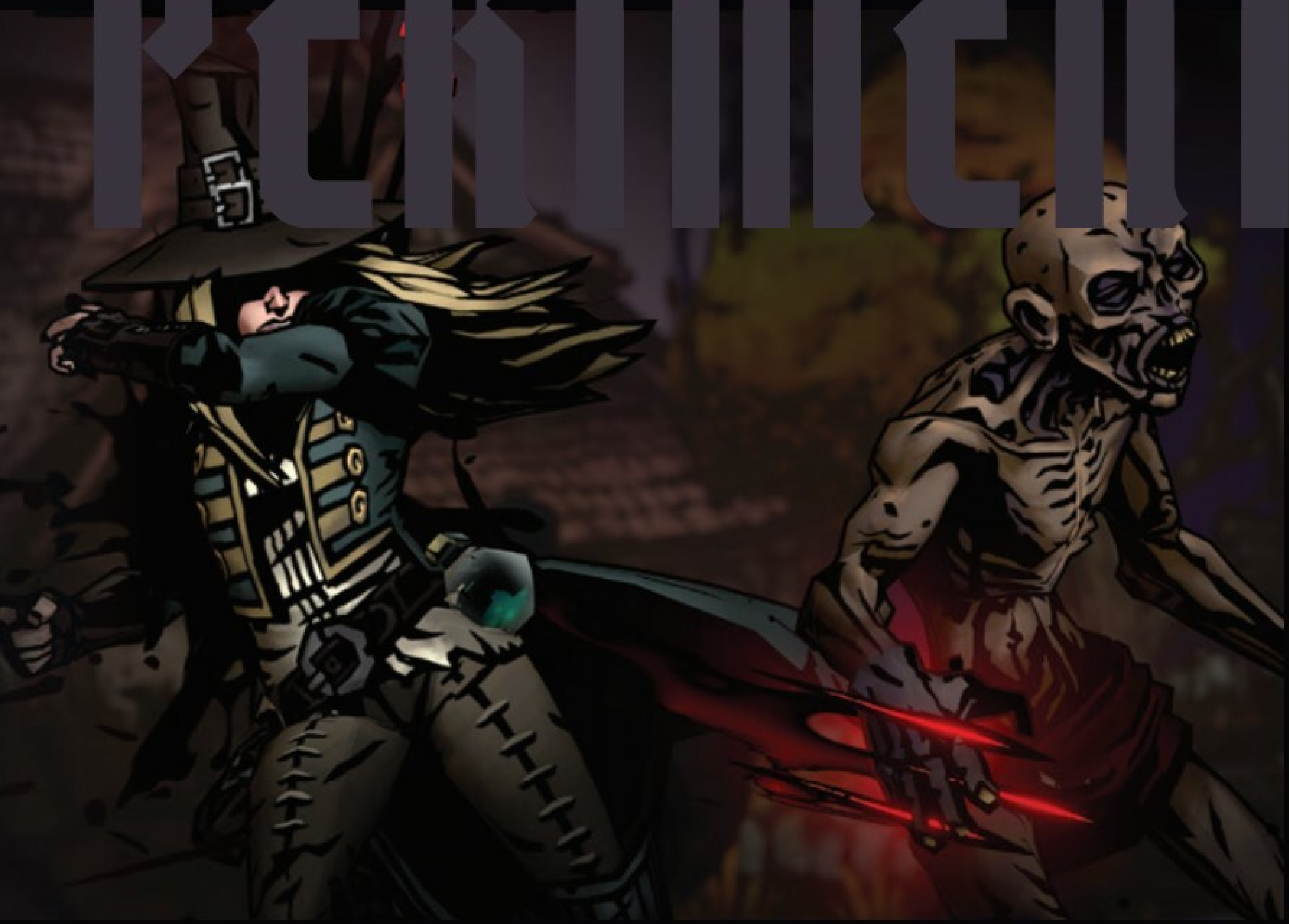
Alphen and Shionne share a connection. The game hints it goes even deeper than what's on the surface

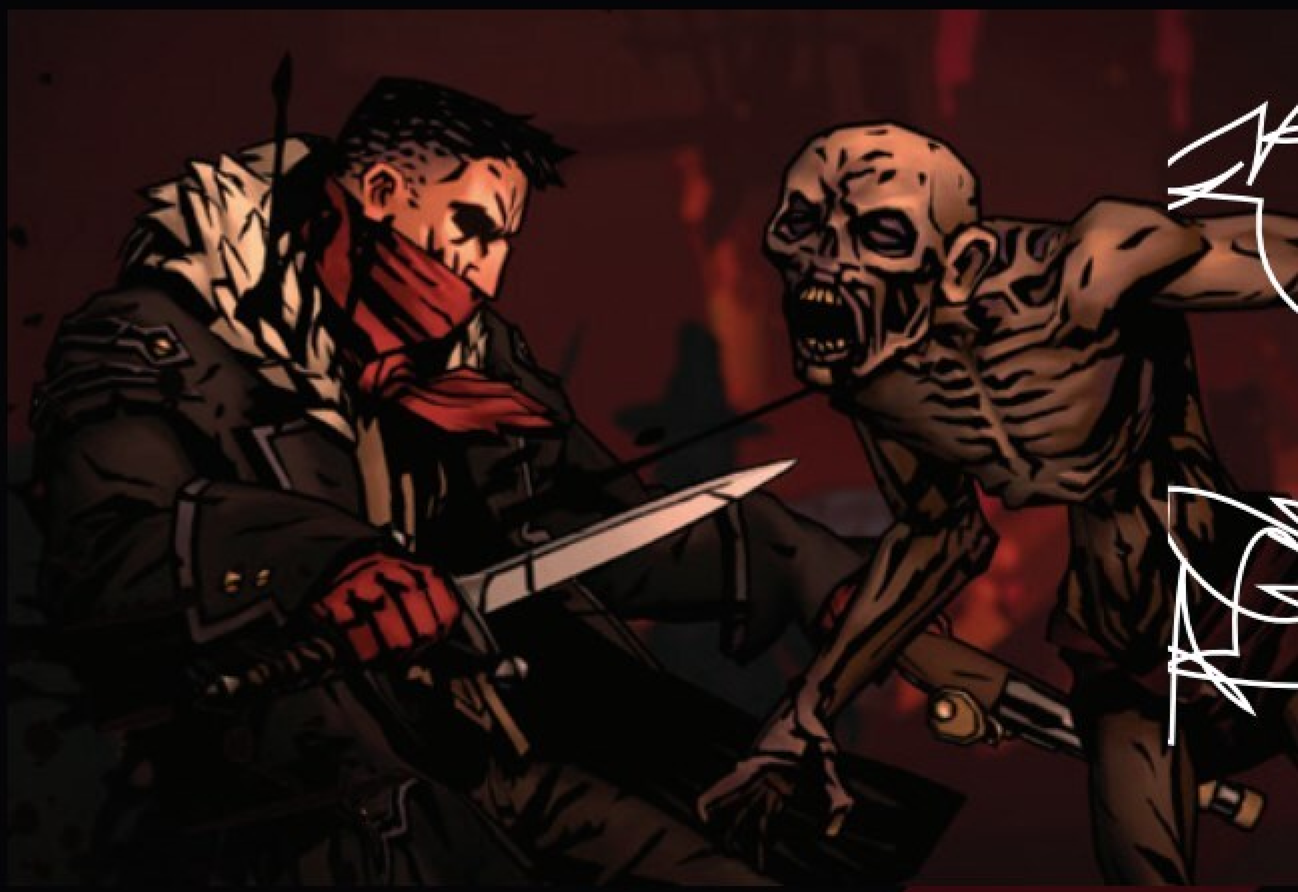
ELD
EX

RITCH PERIMENTATION

Red Hook Studios taps into cosmic horror and signature style with Darkest Dungeon 2

by DANIEL TACK





- » **Platform** PC
- » **Style** 1-Player Role-Playing
- » **Publisher** Red Hook Studios
- » **Developer** Red Hook Studios
- » **Release** TBA (Early Access 2021)

The world is at its end. Wild accelerationist cults set fire to the cities. Pastoral baronies become insatiable hungering mouths upon mouths. Only your ragtag band of guilt-ridden adventurers can kindle a glimmer of hope to stop the ancient, encroaching evil. With a host of new terrors to overcome, a massive shift to a run-based roguelike structure, and a bold new character, the cosmic aberrations of Darkest Dungeon are poised to serve up fresh challenges and horrors with this scintillating sequel from Red Hook Studios.

Darkest Dungeon 2 isn't content to live in the shadow of the hamlet from the first game. Instead of continuing with the town-building aspects and dungeon crawling of the original game, Darkest Dungeon 2 puts players on a doomed caravan ride into cursed biomes crawling with unbridled decadence. With the stakes as high as the world coming to an end, environments that were hanging on by a thread have spiraled into madness, embracing the worst elements of themselves that were always hidden away. As you ride through the world with a hand-picked crew of adventurers, death and despair are always lurking right around the corner. The same great turn-based combat and stylish gothic look of the first game return, but with constant decisions to make around every corner of each run.

That said, don't fear too much – you acquire hope (an in-game currency) from all of your runs, which you can use to unlock various components to show up in subsequent runs, new characters, skills for your caravan, and even permanent boosts. So even as all is lost – and it will be, frequently – you venture toward the final destination with some degree of progress. A successful run currently looks like it will take around four hours, so it's important to reiterate that players unlock all kinds of special things at the account level based on each journey.

Instead of maneuvering from tile to tile on a dungeon map, the player instead navigates through a map filled with various encounters, destinations, and boss battles. If you're concerned that the roguelike nature of the game means there isn't a cohesive narrative or a canonical ending, fear not, there is an actual ending in the final version of the game. While much of the cast returns for the adventurers, some skills have been changed, edited, or removed to facilitate the new game environment. In addition, characters have more skills to pick from, allowing players to create more diverse and interesting teams.

While the choice to stop at a hospital to heal rather than opt-in to a deadly boss fight may seem obvious, there are other foibles at work here to keep you stressed as you fight for safety and sanity. As in the first game, the concept of the torch remains an essential element. Unlike the first game, the light is critical to continuing the journey, and if it goes out, you're going to die quickly. To keep things lit, you must continue to battle enemies and reduce their numbers from the land. But making time to stop at other checkpoints where you can trade with the hoarder, discover valuable curios at an academic study, or just help random survivors huddled around a wagon is also important.

"The dark here is not sustainable," says Red Hook co-founder and creative director Chris Bourassa. "And I don't mean that in a fun way. Narratively and from a gameplay standpoint, it's not sustainable. If you run your torch to the ground, just because of what the torch means, this time, it's not just a literal measure of how much light there is. Allegorically, it's the hope for the future that you're sort of carrying on your back. And so if it goes out, it's kind of game over. You get one last shot. We give you a really tough encounter; the cult catches up to you and jumps you, and if you can fight them back, we give you a little bit more gas to try to get ahead and hopefully restore it somehow. But it doesn't fill the same role as it did."

Round 3
Hallė

Round 1
Steinmann

If all you do on the journey is try to seek out non-combat nodes on the map, you'll end up underpowered and crushed by the weight of darkness. However, try to take on too much or some dangerous high-reward boss nodes, and you may find your adventure ending abruptly. Finding a balance and knowing when to step outside your comfort zone for some advanced risk-taking is what it's all about. It's important to note that the big zone bosses are optional here (with the exception of the final boss) so if you find yourself completely decimated wandering through an area, it's possible to opt-out of the traditional "area boss" and just push on to the next zone. Of course, this will leave you missing out on the associated treasures, so the next area will be a tougher endeavor.

"It's really a power curve thing," says co-founder and design director Tyler Sigman. "So, game design-wise, it's been an interesting challenge. If you avoid every fight, you can avoid the bosses and just try to stay safe, [but] you won't be powerful enough to kill the [final] boss. As you fight, you earn hero upgrade points which are spent to upgrade skills. That's really vital. Basically, if you haven't upgraded any skills, by the time you get to the end boss, you're just not going to be up for it. And so essentially, we try to give you some control over your own power curve, of how many challenges you want."

When you finish each area, you choose between two different areas for the next leg of the journey. Since the game is biome-based, with each area having special inhabitants, you can create a game plan early on – but don't expect anything to be easy. For instance, the inhabitants of the city are quite resilient to fire damage, so it's probably a bad idea to include the Runaway in your crew if you plan to head into the city. However, each area contains modifiers that are different every run, so you must be ready for anything. Even if you plan to head to the farmlands, maybe the modifier on your 10th run will have something horrible there, so you're tempted to select the other biome instead, even if it is a less than ideal pick for your team composition. Random and incredibly dangerous occurrences that players may remember from the first game, like the Shambler and the Collector, return in some form.

THE RUNAWAY

Darkest Dungeon 2 will hit early access with one new character, the Runaway. Like other characters in our merry band of misfits, the Runaway comes from a checkered past. While we don't know the specifics of her sins yet, the Runaway's kit embraces fire, so we can almost certainly assume she did something awful with the element of embers. Fire is a new damage-over-time component in Darkest Dungeon 2, joining its friends bleed and blight (poison).

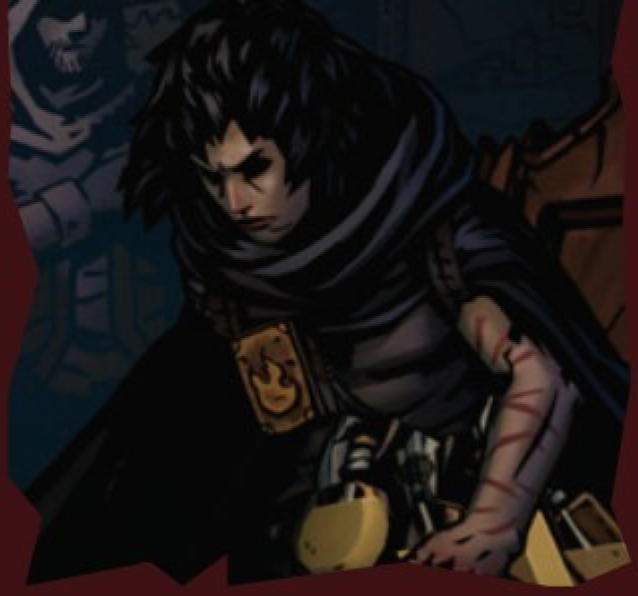
It took time to get the new character's look just right. "Visually I thought it'd be neat to have this sort of younger woman with a giant backpack and hunched over; we pulled a little bit from Newt from Aliens, obviously more grown-up," says Red Hook co-founder and creative director Chris Bourassa. "One of my directions to our animator was to channel a sort of a 'bat girl' kind of vibe. So, she's got this cape, and some of the animations are really fluid where it flares out behind her, and she can retreat to stealth and hide."

It took time for the team to iterate on their ideas for the Runaway, but they liked how well she fit into the fiction. "We just felt creatively she fit the world. She was kind of an extension of the game fiction as a whole, and what better character to debut as a new class than someone who's intrinsically connected to the meta-narrative of the game itself? We could have done a wandering badass with two handguns or something, but it felt a little rote. So mechanically, we added a new DoT [damage-over-time]; we have fire and burn damage in Darkest Dungeon, too. And we needed an evangelist for that mechanic the same way the plague doctor kind of works for poison or blight."

"We went through a couple of ideas. I think it's easy, it's safe to add a badass, give it a cool weapon and a cool faceplate or something, and you're off to the races," Bourassa says. "But we kind of asked ourselves, 'What type of character would inhabit this world that's crumbling down and falling apart?' And it made sense that some kind of a furtive, scurrying, outwardly disadvantaged ... a little bit like an agile Antiquarian in a sense, but highly proficient in combat. Thematically, it felt like someone who's picking through the rubble of the old world."

The Runaway is a survivor, a scavenger, and a scrapper. Exemplified by those aspects, she fits easily into lineups in multiple positions. However, she may be best at getting into the action hot and heavy and then using stealth to head back into the lineup to a safer area, perhaps moving a friend closer to the fray. The Runaway excels at disrupting foes, applying flames, and adjusting the flow and positioning of battle. Check out the entire Runaway skill lineup (right), and you can start planning on how to place her into your favorite Darkest Dungeon teams.

The Runaway likely won't be the only new face in Darkest Dungeon 2, either. "We're bringing one new character for early access launch, but it's not like we have decided only to make one new one, period," says Red Hook co-founder and design director Tyler Sigman. "Hopefully, if the game finds an audience as Darkest Dungeon did, then you know, DLC, etc."



SEARING STRIKE
A simple attack that also lights enemies on fire

RANSACK
Want to get the enemy close? Hook them closer to the hot zone with this skill

FIREFLY
A thrown incendiary attack that adds fire

DRAGONFLY
Escape to safety (backline) and incinerate nearby foes

SMOKESCREEN
Blind enemies and leave them vulnerable

CAUTERIZE
Heal someone's wounds with heat

RUN AND HIDE
Retreat and heal your own wounds

CONTROLLED BURN
Set a fire in an enemy position that will continually burn anyone in it

BACKDRAFT
Use damage-over-time fire stacks to deliver a powerful blast to the target behind them

FIRESTARTER
Not enough fire going on in your team? Use this to add fire to one of your ally's attacks

HEARTHLIGHT
Discover hidden foes and restore sight to your own debuffed crew

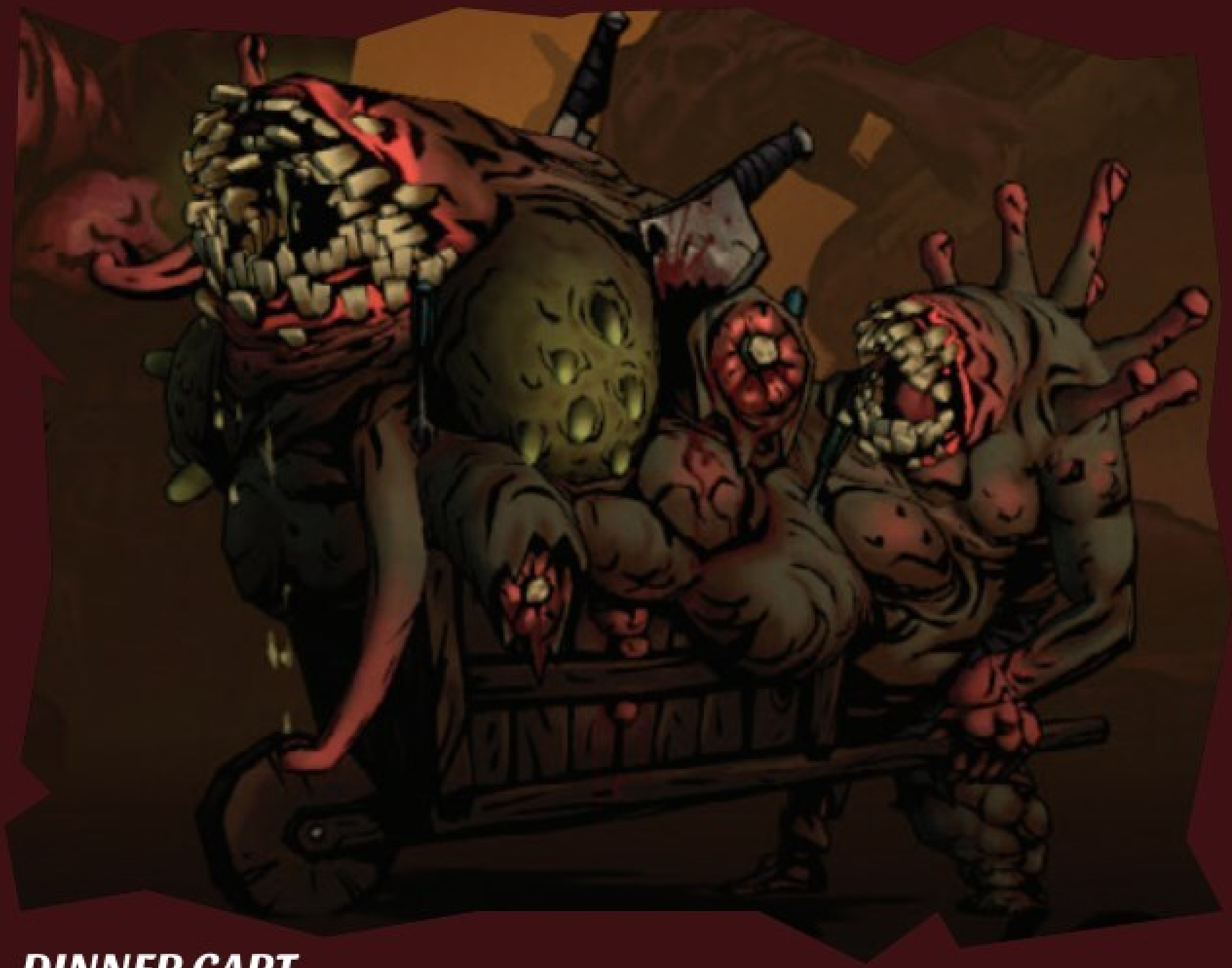
THE PLAGUE EATERS

Every biome in Darkest Dungeon 2 is associated with a faction. In the once-pastoral farmlands, the Plague Eaters hold dominion over all, consuming everything with their endless mouths. Tiny baronies and humble farms give in to their base instincts, with this faction dealing with the world's impending doom with unchecked gluttony.

"That's really the top line for all the factions. So, I think as the world falls apart, I think more people would give in to their base instincts than not. And so every faction really represents a group of people who give in to the worst parts of themselves," says Red Hook co-founder and creative director Chris Bourassa. "And so what you're doing is, as the world's crumbling and you're making your way across to try to prevent it from vanishing or completely coming undone, you're facing these people who have sort of just willingly abdicated their humanity almost in favor of this kind of base desires."

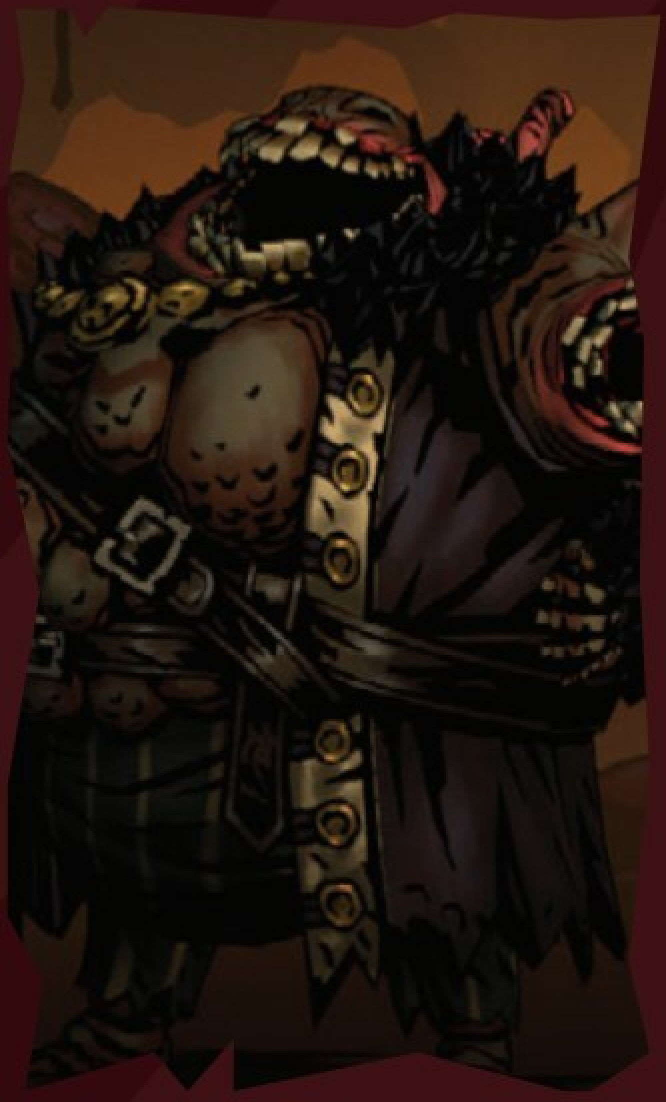
Their endless eating facilitates their ever-growing bulk and gives them access to powerful regenerative abilities. The many faces of the Plague Eaters are resistant to blight, so bleed and burn are the preferred methods of damage when taking the caravan through the farmlands.

The Plague Eaters are more than happy to eat each other as they fall in combat, so managing the corpses and denying them of their sustenance can make your encounters much more manageable. If you let them feed unchecked, expect grueling, lengthy encounters that wear your team down to the ground. Let's meet some of the cast of gruesome foes that you'll meet down on the farm.



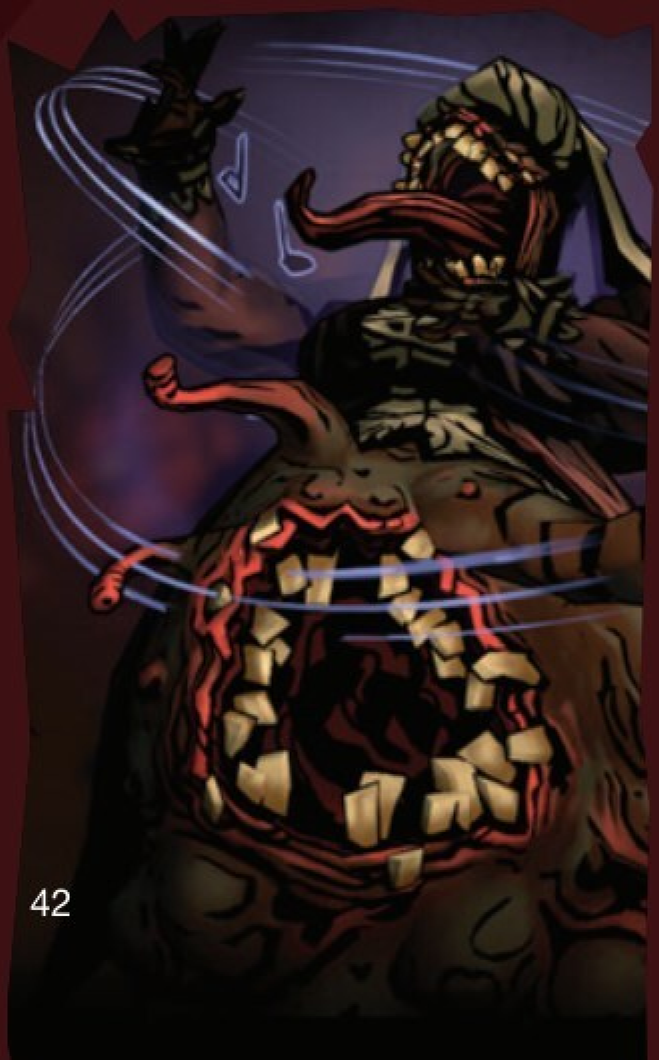
DINNER CART

Yep, it's just a big cart of dinner. This thing will chuck rot at our heroes and make them more vulnerable to other attacks, taunt them, blind them, and otherwise be a massive pain to deal with. In addition to its unsavory standard annoyances, the dinner cart can create fresh corpses for everyone to feast on, making it quite dangerous. The dinner cart can consume corpses too, which allow it to unleash massive amounts of blight and stress damage to your backline. Like other targets that prefer to hide in the back and cause trouble, taking the dinner cart out with ranged attacks before it can deliver its foodstuffs is the best plan of action.



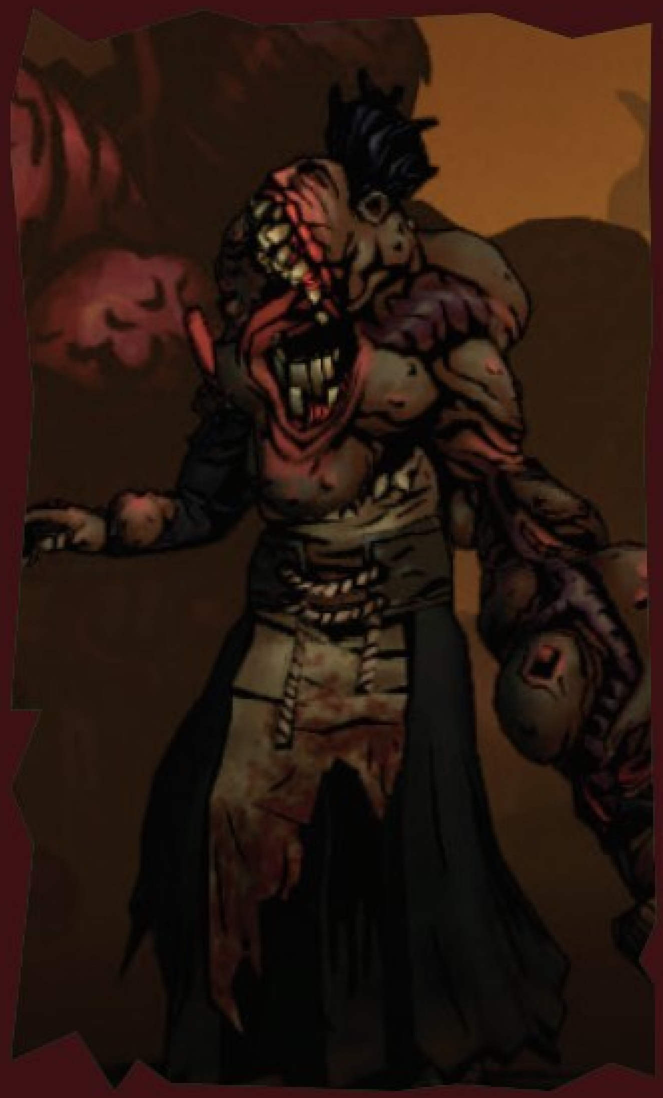
THE LORD

Once proud leaders of man and beast, now just beast. These heavy support units can become a big problem if you let them bolster their own lines or enfeeble your own. With tongue lashing and baneful breath, Lords can whittle your troops down to nothing. As with many farm inhabitants, it's best to keep an eye on corpses during the fight and deny the Lord's insatiable hunger whenever possible. If a Lord gets to eat, not only can he regenerate his hit points over time, making the fight last even longer, but he also unlocks an incredibly dangerous stun attack, the bilious cannon. Pro tip: Don't get hit by the bilious cannon.



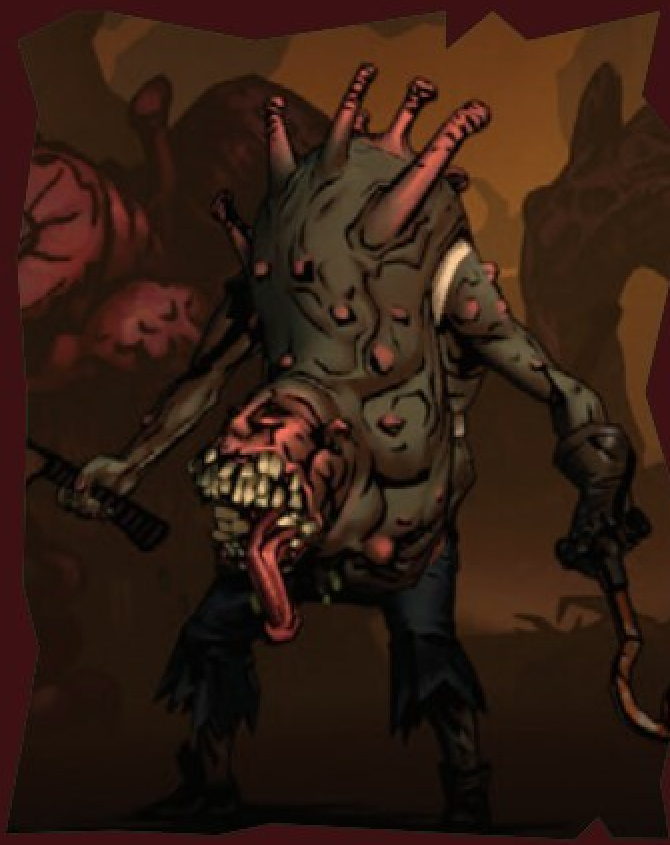
THE LADY

While the Lord isn't afraid to get physical after dishing out some support skills, the Lady prefers to do her damage from the backline. The Lady excels at blighting at range with Be Our Guest, using Mother's Embrace to mess with the player's positioning, or attacking the front characters directly with Mulch. Like many farmland inhabitants, it's best not to let the Lady feed. If she does, prepare for your sanity to take a massive hit as she unleashes a bilious wail. Are you seeing a theme here yet?



THE MAID

The maid helps tend to the livestock. That's right; the Plague Eaters sometimes like to take meals into combat with them. Goats. Cows. Whatever is available. The maid is a rather uninteresting unit when there's no livestock on the battlefield, but when there is, she can buff livestock up, turning them into suitable meatshields. The strategy here is not to let her hide behind livestock or other fetid fiends, hook her to the front and take her out quickly.



THE BUTCHER

Like the maid, the butcher excels in the presence of livestock. The butcher can tear into lines with bleed damage and execute a massive party-wide heal when livestock is around. As you can imagine, preventing this huge heal from going off is the top priority, so that means taking out the butcher or the livestock as fast as you can before working your way to other targets.

The Great Library

Permadeath is back. If someone reaches the death state, they're gone for good. Since you can't easily head back to the hamlet to replenish your team like you could in the first game, you, instead, have to rely on picking up one new character at an inn. This character may not be tailored to your group at all, but sometimes you have to work with what you have available. This pickup is a one-and-done deal as well, so it's all you get. If someone dies again, you have to struggle along with whatever you have.

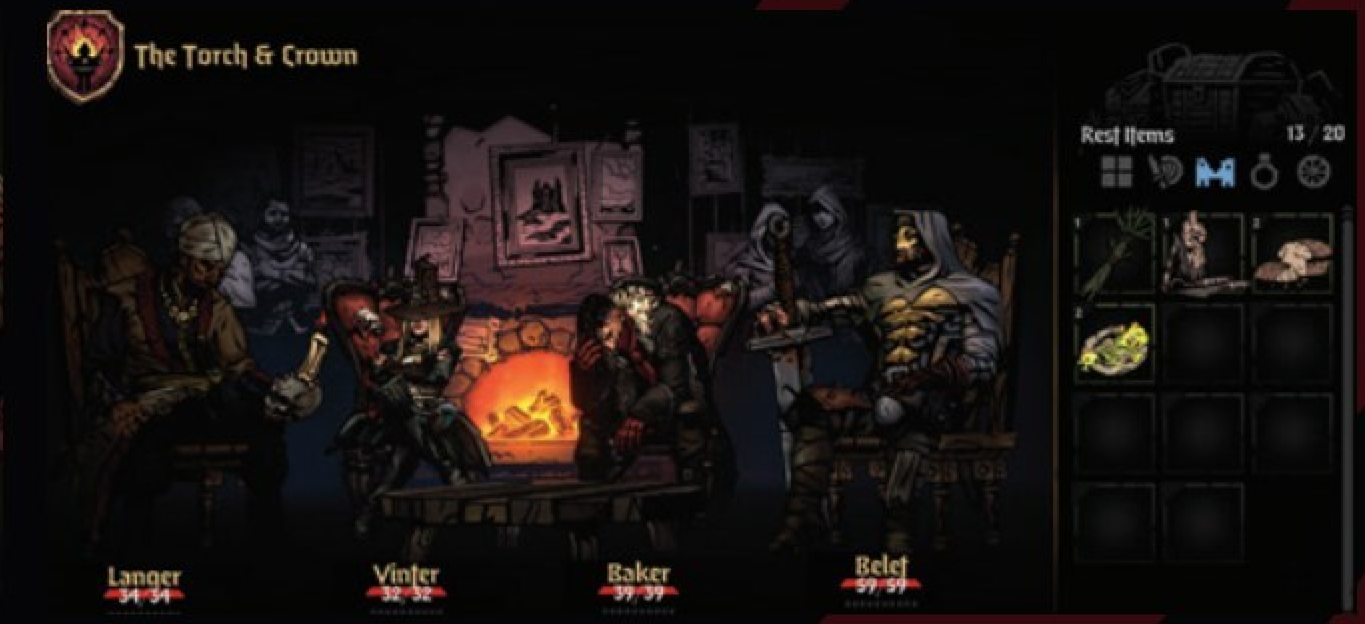
"You can't have engagement and emotional attachment without tension and fear of loss. So, if we coddle you and make sure that nothing bad will ever happen to you, you're not going to feel that same level of excitement," Bourassa explains. "Like when your guy survives a death's door roll or something because you're not worried. You know, if he dies, he dies. We're always trying to thread that or walk that line, where what you have invested in could be taken away because that's really the only way you can play poker, right? You have to be afraid of losing your money. That's why people play, because the excitement is high when you win, and it's terrifying when you're kind of on the ropes. To recreate that experience, we have to make sure that the player knows that we are willing to take their chips."

To further engagement with your party members, Red Hook also promises greater insight into the characters you take along for each run, with narrative elements that delve into their backstories and relationships along the way.

And the changes don't stop there. Another aspect that has changed significantly is healing. Players can no longer leave one enemy alive and heal up to full – something that had rife potential for abuse in the original title. Instead, players must heal up outside of combat, which also facilitates group compositions that probably wouldn't be optimal in the original. Don't want to bring a healer along? No problem, live the dream and make that quad-DPS stack.

While early access will allow Red Hook Studios to tune things, the current plan isn't to have different difficulty settings like the first game. Instead, in typical roguelike fashion, special modifiers and alterations called mutators let players to ratchet up the challenge if they're looking to whet their appetite for adversity. There's also a good possibility that other roguelike staples, like daily run seeds where you can compare your performance against your friends and the greater playerbase, are also on deck for implementation.

Our next journey into madness probably won't be fully completed for a bit, with early access for Darkest Dungeon 2 slated to arrive this year. After Darkest Dungeon's PC launch, it eventually made its way to console, which we're hoping happens here as well, but nothing has been confirmed. Here's hoping it reaches as many gamers as possible because this is one time that we can't wait for the impending end of the world. ◆



journeys on the horizon

role-playing games we can't wait to play

Years ago, RPG fans would often wait long stretches between quality releases, hoping for the next great game to sate their appetite. But those days are long gone, as the appeal and potential of the genre has exploded, and we all now have dozens of exciting releases to look forward to exploring. Whether you want to launch into deep space, learn the ways of magic, or ride your steed into battle, the upcoming slate of role-playing games has something for everyone.

by Game Informer Staff

ELDEN RING

Platform: *PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC*
Release: *January 2022*

Throughout the last decade, From Software has made a name for itself crafting best-in-class action/RPGs that give players a sense of serious challenge and huge triumphs as giant opponents fall. The subgenre of Souls-likes began here, and now director Hidetaka Miyazaki and the team are tackling the open-world structure, with some collaboration with famed fantasy writer George R.R. Martin. Elden Ring features elements inspired by From's prior projects, with new exploration elements injected into the mix. This isn't Dark Souls 4, but if you're a fan of the studio's previous work, you're going to feel right at home.

The Souls components of beautiful and terrifying environments, tight combat that rewards precise timing, and lush dark fantasy vibes are on full display. Elden Ring is essentially divided into two chunks. One is the vast open world where the player can use their mount, tap into all kinds of traversal methods, and explore to find loot, gear, secret bosses, hidden areas, and more. The other chunk is six core "dungeon" areas that can be likened to more traditional Souls areas, where players carve their way through curated set pieces with various encounters and environmental challenges before capping off the experience with a tumultuous boss battle. So essentially, this is kind of like having it all – From is experimenting with numerous new systems and giving the player unprecedented freedom in a giant, open game space, but also keeping its highly designed and definitive experiential structure that moves players to face off against challenges in a tailored fashion. These six core areas each house a demigod lord that our "tarnished" character must beat to recover the Great Runes. When united, these shattered pieces of the titular Elden Ring confer enormous power.

The open-world area is immense, and players can employ mounted travel as a means to get around. You can use the mount to even

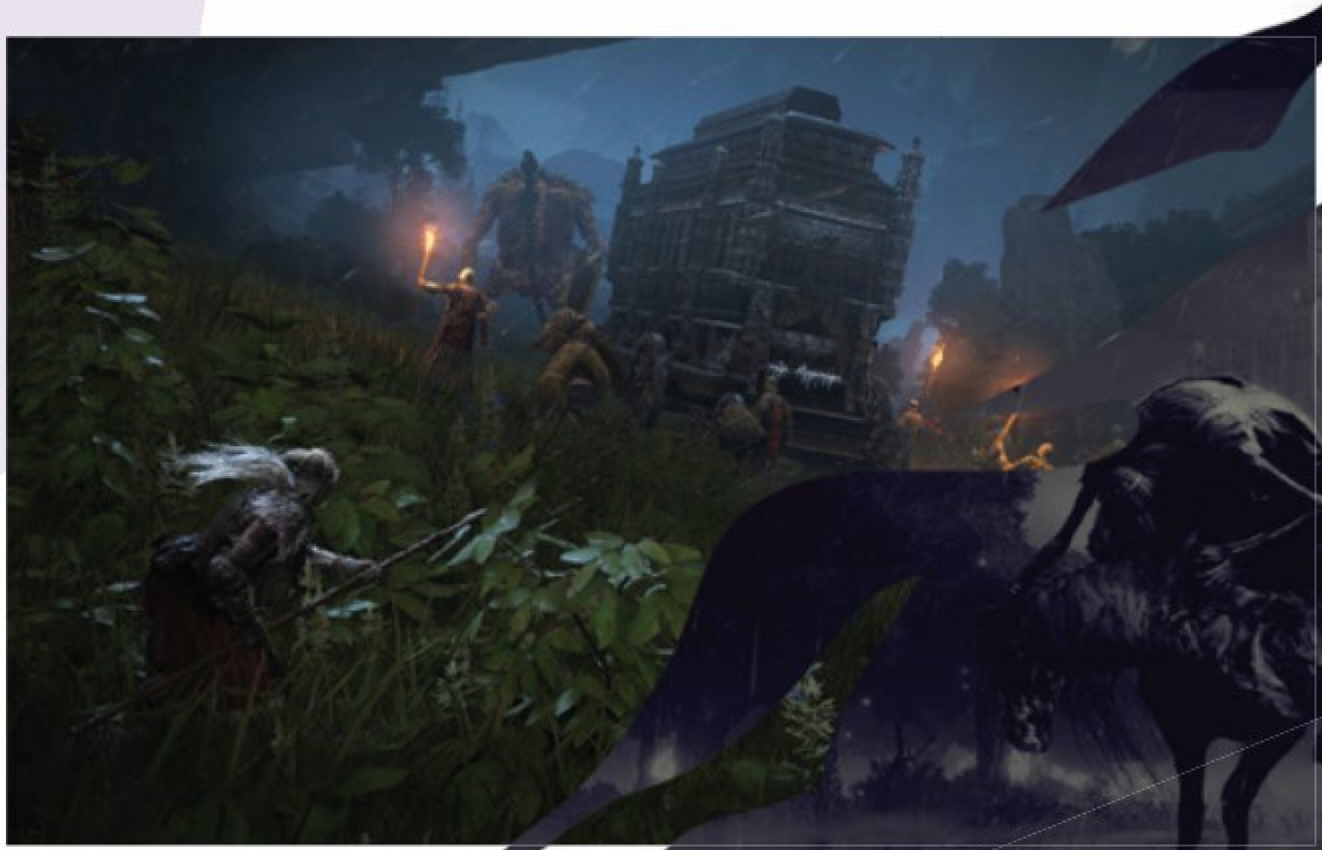
scale up sheer walls. Mounting also allows the player a great deal of vertical speed and mobility, and can be used to participate in mounted combat. In addition, players can employ special spirits in their battles, sort of like mini summon spells. These spirits are part of your kit, so instead of just the usual weapons and armor, players select which companions to employ for various effects and abilities. Speaking of summoning, players are going to be able to call friends (and random players) in to help. Since the world is so big, traditional From Software summoning markings wouldn't really get the job done on their own, so instead, large, clearly marked areas are available where you can call upon the help of others. While players are still going to use the sign system to call in allies, having set locations in which to do this funnels things in a fashion so players can better find each other. Invasions are also on the menu for those who want to get in and take on other tarnished ones in combat, but there may be a different ruleset in place this time around where there's more player consent involved.

Players can create their character, and based on everything we've seen, tune things to their style of gameplay more than ever before. Yes, you can play a bold knight. Sure, you can play a mage with some powerful arcane missiles. And it even looks like you can engage in stealth elements this time around to get some rogue fun in, even if it's in a minor way. Elden Ring features a dedicated jump button, so you can unleash powerful attacks from above and search hard-to-reach places. Of course, mixing and matching various components of the fantasy is something many players do, so we'll see how things shake out at the end of the day. The real question is: Is the Moonlight Greatsword going to make an appearance?

The latest trailer shows off a ton of horrible yet fascinating creatures, monsters, and characters that we can't wait to meet, including a giant pot with arms. I hope these things aren't going to be the new mimics, where we'll go to roll over or smash some pots and end up battling some surprise pot kin. Numerous bosses were also shown, including one that impales the player in a similar fashion to Dark Souls II's Pursuer. You can complete a playthrough of Elden Ring without fighting all the bosses, so hopefully this means there will not only be standard optional bosses out in the open world area, but also some secret and daunting challenges to find on par with The Nameless King.

While not much is known about it at this time, Elden Ring features a crafting system, which is a bit unusual compared to From games' standard dark fantasy RPG core. How involved this system is and what it yields remain to be seen.

Elden Ring is slated to arrive early next year, and we'll be ready with our swords sharpened and spells primed. I can't wait for the next intimidating beast to shred me into a thousand pieces again and again, nor can I wait for the thrill as I topple the impossible. *» Daniel Tack*



MONARK

Platform: *PS5, PS4, Switch, PC*
Release: *Early 2022*

Shin Mikado Academy is sectioned off by a barrier. To make matters worse, the campus is blanketed in a madness-inducing Mist. Entering a dangerous realm, called the Otherworld, is the only way to get out of this predicament. Monark is a tactical RPG where you use demonic powers in turn-based combat, deepen bonds with classmates, and investigate the academy grounds to "master your own destiny."

POKÉMON BRILLIANT DIAMOND & SHINING PEARL

Platform: *Switch*
Release: *November 19*

Continuing Game Freak and Nintendo's tradition of remaking classic Pokémon games for current platforms, Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl remain faithful to the original story, but add modern conveniences and more cinematic, up-close battles. These remakes allow you to experience the story of the Sinnoh games prior to traveling to the feudal era of that same region with Pokémon Legends: Arceus in January.

SALT AND SACRIFICE

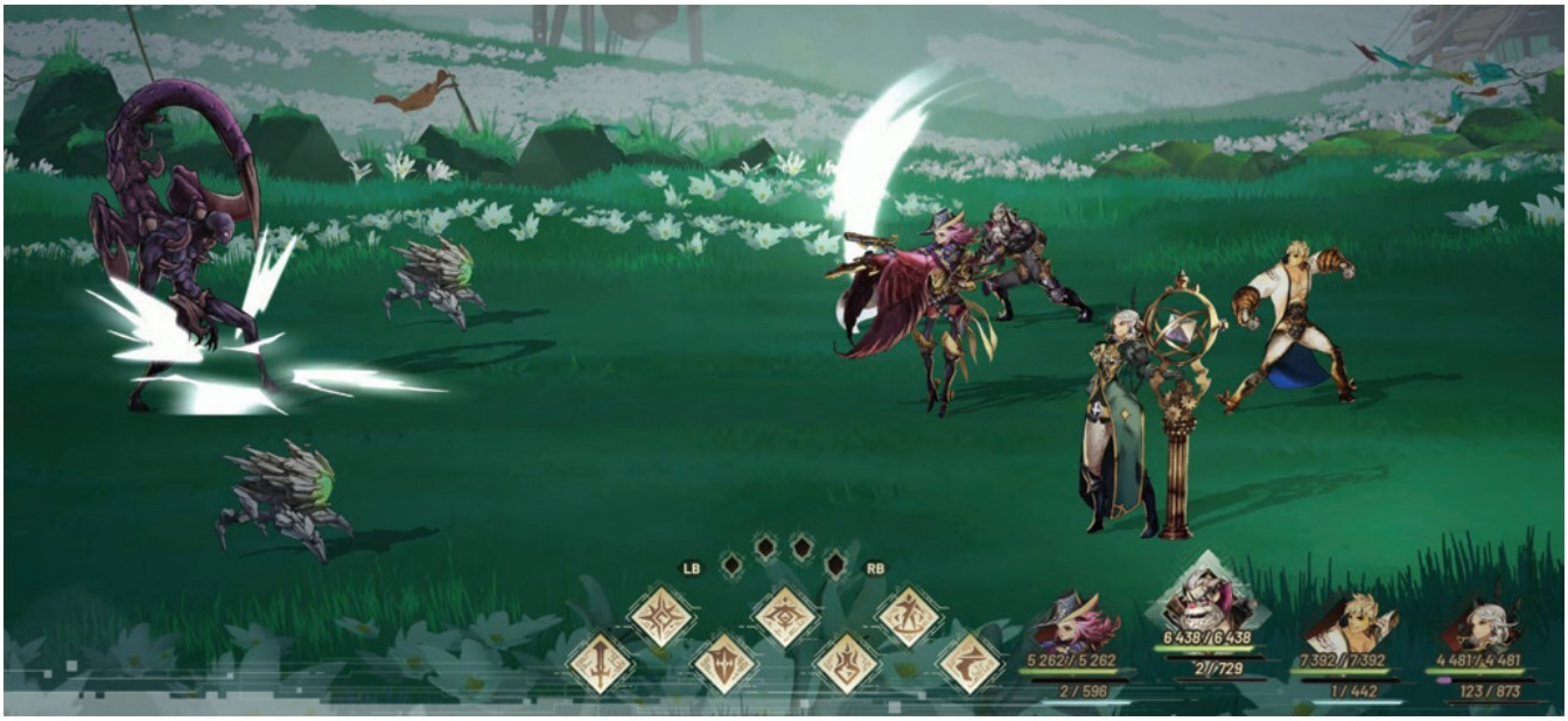
Platform: *PS5, PS4*
Release: *2022*

The follow-up to Ska Studio's excellent Salt and Sanctuary looks to maintain many traits of its predecessor, but with a greater variety of actions, more sophisticated animation, and a whole new conceit about hunting down monstrous mages. Players fight through a 2D side-scrolling dark fantasy setting, and the precision and danger of fights is reminiscent of the Dark Souls formula. Local and online co-op may help to ease the burden, but expect a big challenge as you imbibe the magebane and hunt your foes.

ASTRIA ASCENDING

Platform: *PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC*
Release: *September 30*

Fans of classic RPGs should keep an eye on Astria Ascending. As one of the eight chosen warriors, you're on a 50+ hour quest to save a beautifully hand-drawn world. While the game features a variation of traditional turn-based combat, its veteran talent makes it worth keeping an eye on. Final Fantasy writer Kazushige Nojima pens the story, famed artist Akihiko Yoshida handles visual design, and composer Hitoshi Sakimoto provides the score.



THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS FROM ZERO

Platform: *PS4, Switch, PC*
Release: *Fall 2022*

This entry is considered the start of the Crossbell arc – a missing piece of the beloved Trails series that never reached our shores. It stars rookie police investigator Lloyd Bannings, who also made an appearance in the Cold Steel games. Better yet? NIS America announced it's working with Geofront – the team behind the fantastic English fan translation that hit last year. Finally getting an official release for this is a victory in itself.

RUNE FACTORY 5

Platform: *Switch*
Release: *Early 2022*

After nearly a 10-year hiatus, this beloved hybrid farming sim and action/RPG series is back. As usual, you wake up with no memory in a small town that's being overrun with monsters. You join the peacekeeping rangers to build a new life, where you farm and fish to make ends meet. However, you also must confront the dangerous baddies roaming the land, exploring dungeons for answers and recruiting others to fight at your side.

BATTLECAKES

Platform: *Xbox One, PC*
Release: *2021*

Ever want to play a traditional RPG but one that's also really, really adorable? Imagine battling with cupcakes, sprinkles, and other assorted sweets. While you can whack away at your enemies with a variety of tasty treats, you can also choose to befriend them instead, because this is a game that's just about as cute as it gets. Naturally, you can pet cats. If you're looking for something without the world-ending vibes and just want a pastel playground to play around in, BattleCakes should be on your radar.

EIYUDEN CHRONICLE: HUNDRED HEROES

Platform: *PS5, Xbox Series X, PS4, Xbox One, PC*
Release: *2023*

Fans of the beloved Suikoden franchise have been waiting a long time for a new installment, and that wait has stretched from years into decades. While there's little chance for a genuine revival right now, hope persists thanks to original series creator Yoshitaka Murayama. He has joined with other veteran leaders of that franchise, building a new studio and game that is meant to celebrate Suikoden's legacy, even while striking out into new territory. Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes blew past its crowdfunding goals in 2020, and while it's still a long way from launch, we're now starting to get greater insight into the anticipated project.

"Creating games is challenging in many ways, such as gathering a good team to work with and funds to budget the game," Murayama says. "Either way, I always remember to ask myself, 'What do we need to do to make the game as interesting as possible?'" For Murayama and his team at Rabbit & Bear Studios, the answer to that question lies in celebrating the success of Suikoden, with features like a six-person party, a fortress-building mechanic, and a massive cast of 100 playable characters. The popular duels of Suikoden are also making a return. "Duels will be different than what was seen in the past but are still an important element to fleshing out the game," Murayama tells us.

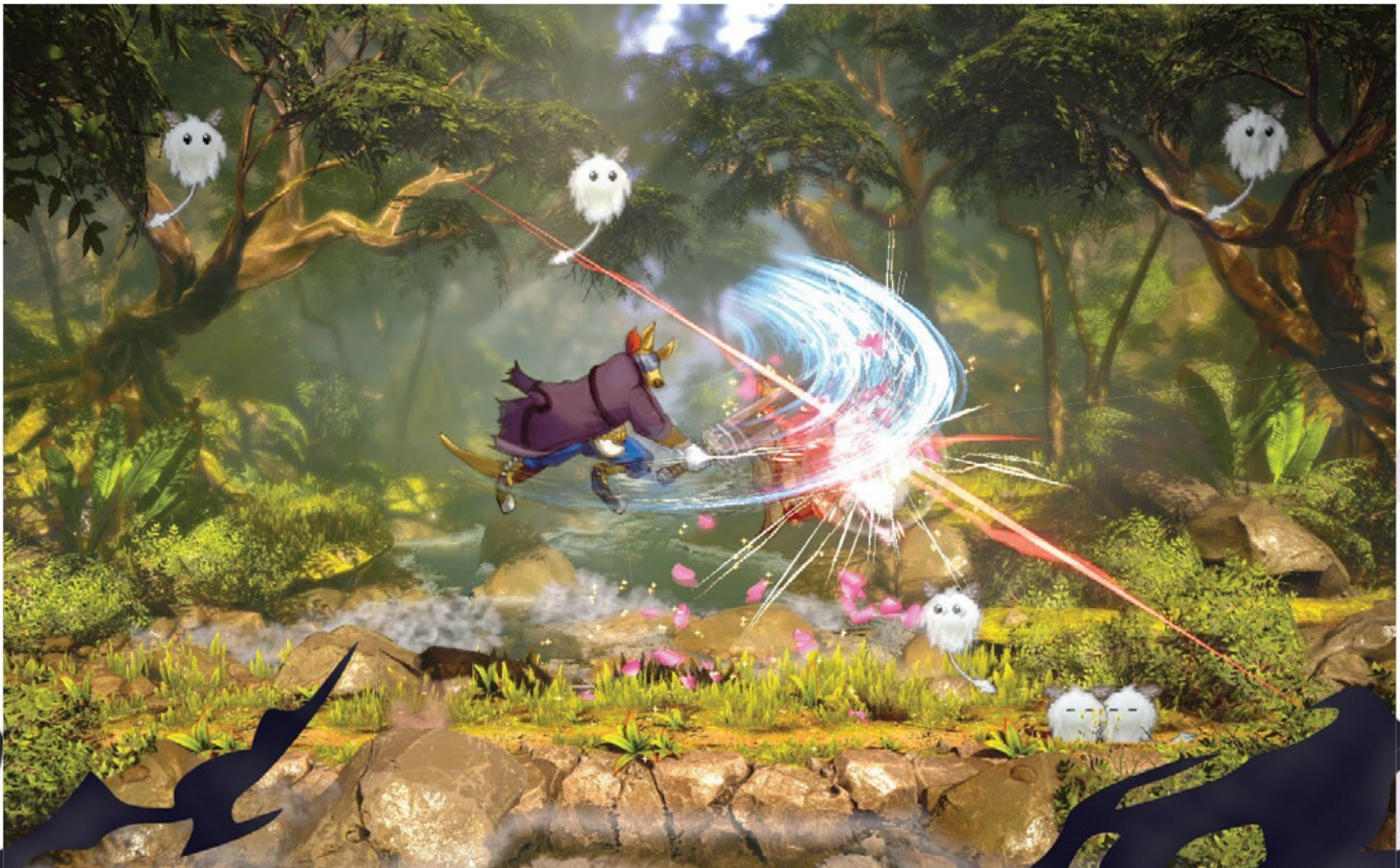
Even as the game harkens back to familiar features, the tantalizing glimpses we've had of Hundred Heroes make it clear that this is far more than a rehash of an old design. A striking art design mixes hand-drawn sprites with a 3D environment. This style is used to startling effect in combat. Battles often play out along foreground and background planes, with the camera zooming back and forth to communicate motion and speed.

Rabbit & Bear is also investing heavily in a guild system, built to expand progression and improvement beyond the scope of individual heroes. "In Eiyuden Chronicle, there is the aspect of developing your own forces, besides the fun of simply developing your own character and your own party," Murayama says. Guilds appear as one aspect of your growing fortress town. Whether it's a miners' guild, woodcutters guild, craftsman guild, or one of several others, these organizations allow the gathering of resources, which help feed the growth of the broader town and all the other guilds within. The party members assigned to a guild work party act somewhat independently; they may head straight to work but could just as easily slack off and skip work at a tavern.

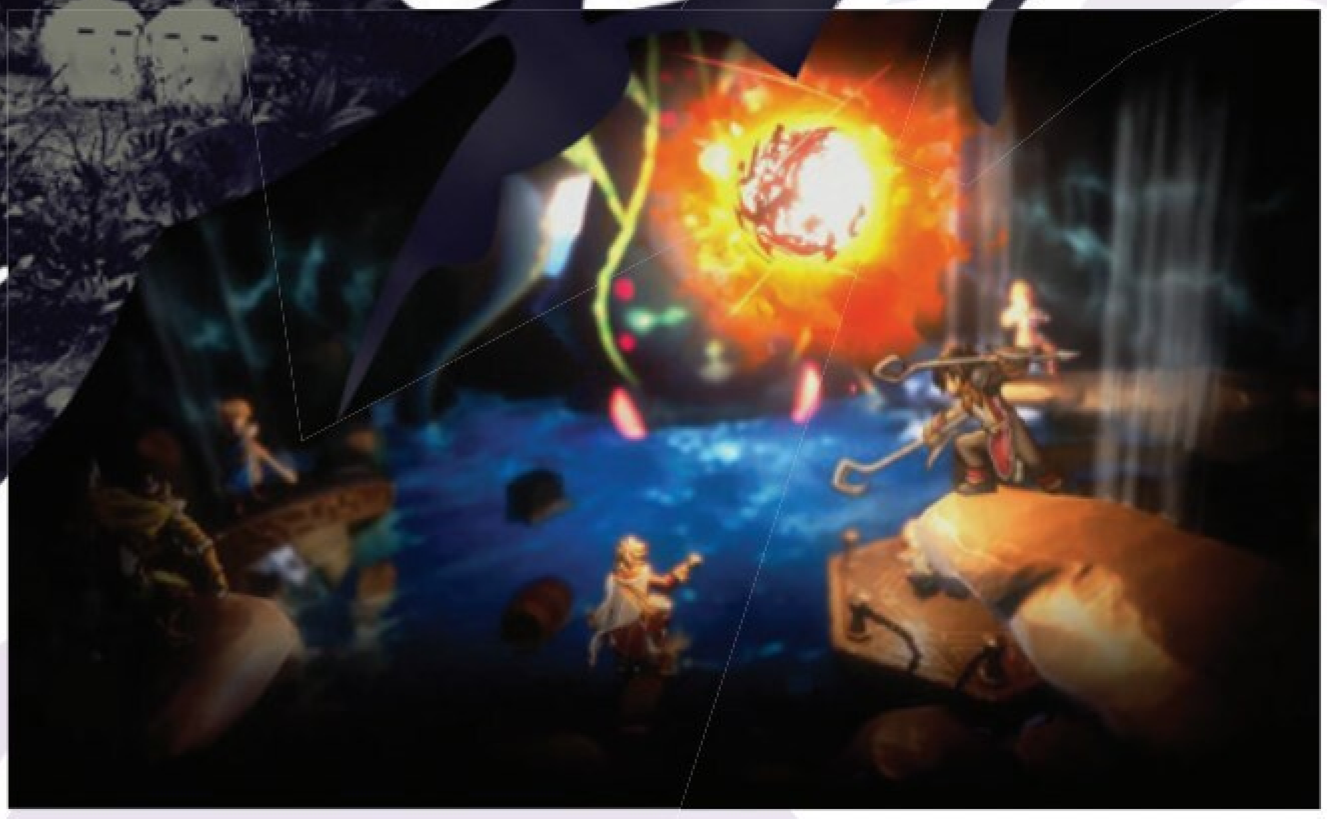
Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes received especially enthusiastic backing from fans, granting the team the opportunity to expand the project's scope from its original structure, including entirely new mechanics, voice acting, minigames, and even a broader array of consoles on which the game will appear. While that bodes well for the breadth of content players may eventually encounter, Murayama doesn't hesitate to highlight the new feature he is most excited to see. "That's easily the cooking minigame – there's a lot of fun to be had with cooking various dishes and learning more about the story of battles among cooks," he says.

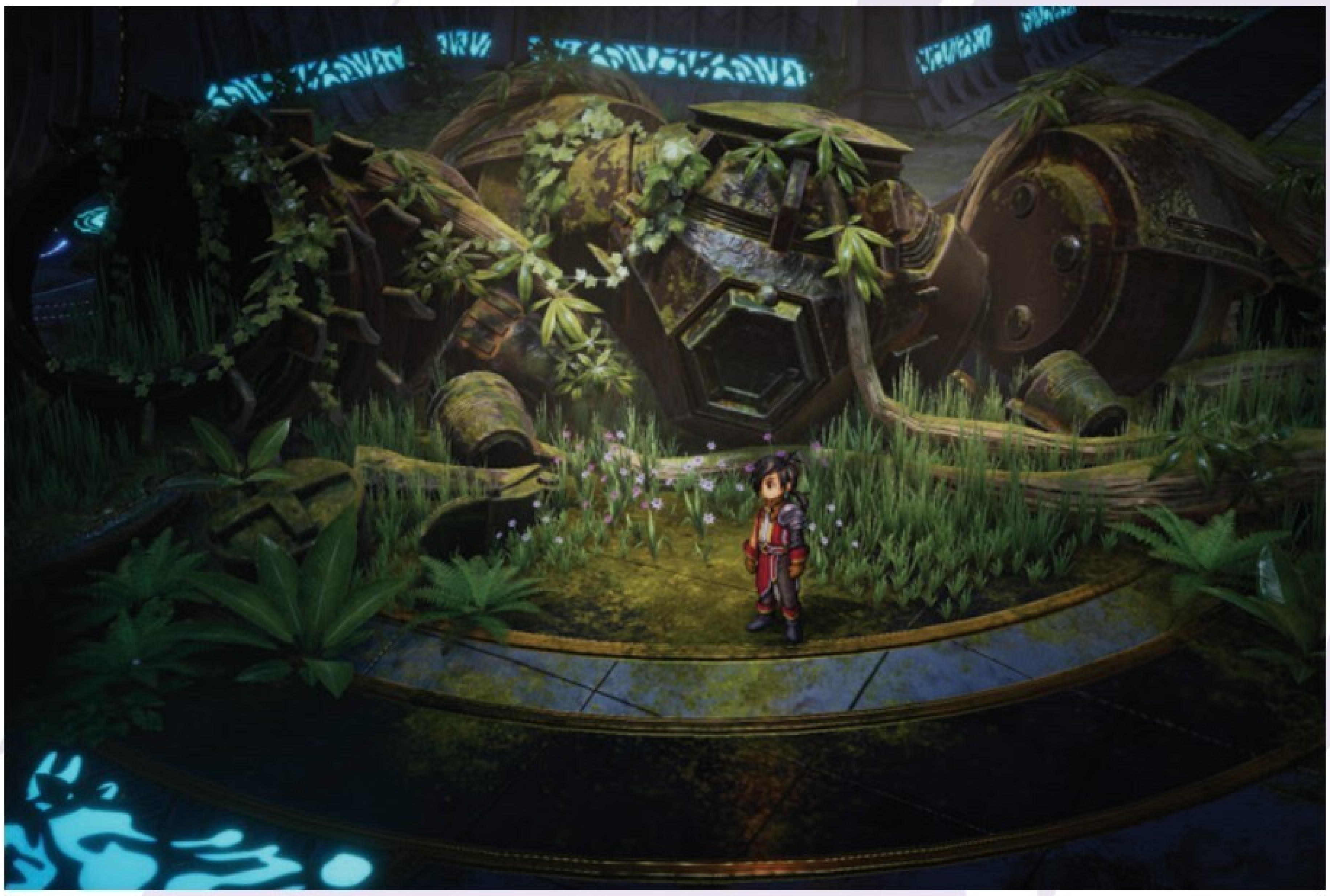
With so many characters to discover, one especially intriguing addition is the promise of New Game + mode. "That allows you to play the game on a new difficulty level with special conditions and game rules so that the fun of playing the game a second time exists," Murayama says.

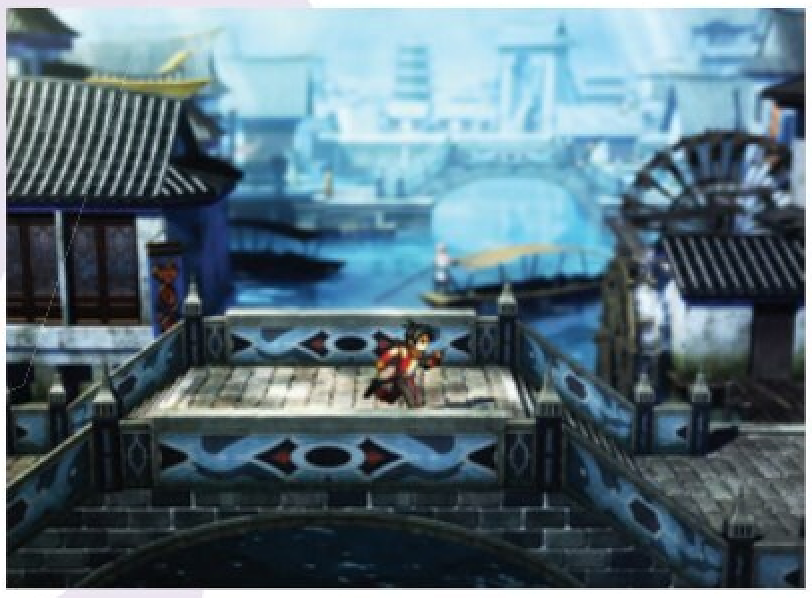
We've learned to be cautious about new crowdfunded studios led by veteran developers when they try to create follow-ups to successful projects from earlier in their careers. However, Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes seems to be nailing much of what we'd want in a spiritual successor to the celebrated Suikoden games. The absence of the unique style of those earlier games has been keenly felt in the JRPG genre, and fans will have a lot to celebrate if the debut of Eiyuden Chronicle hits the mark. *» **Matt Miller***



Nowa
Waaaugh!



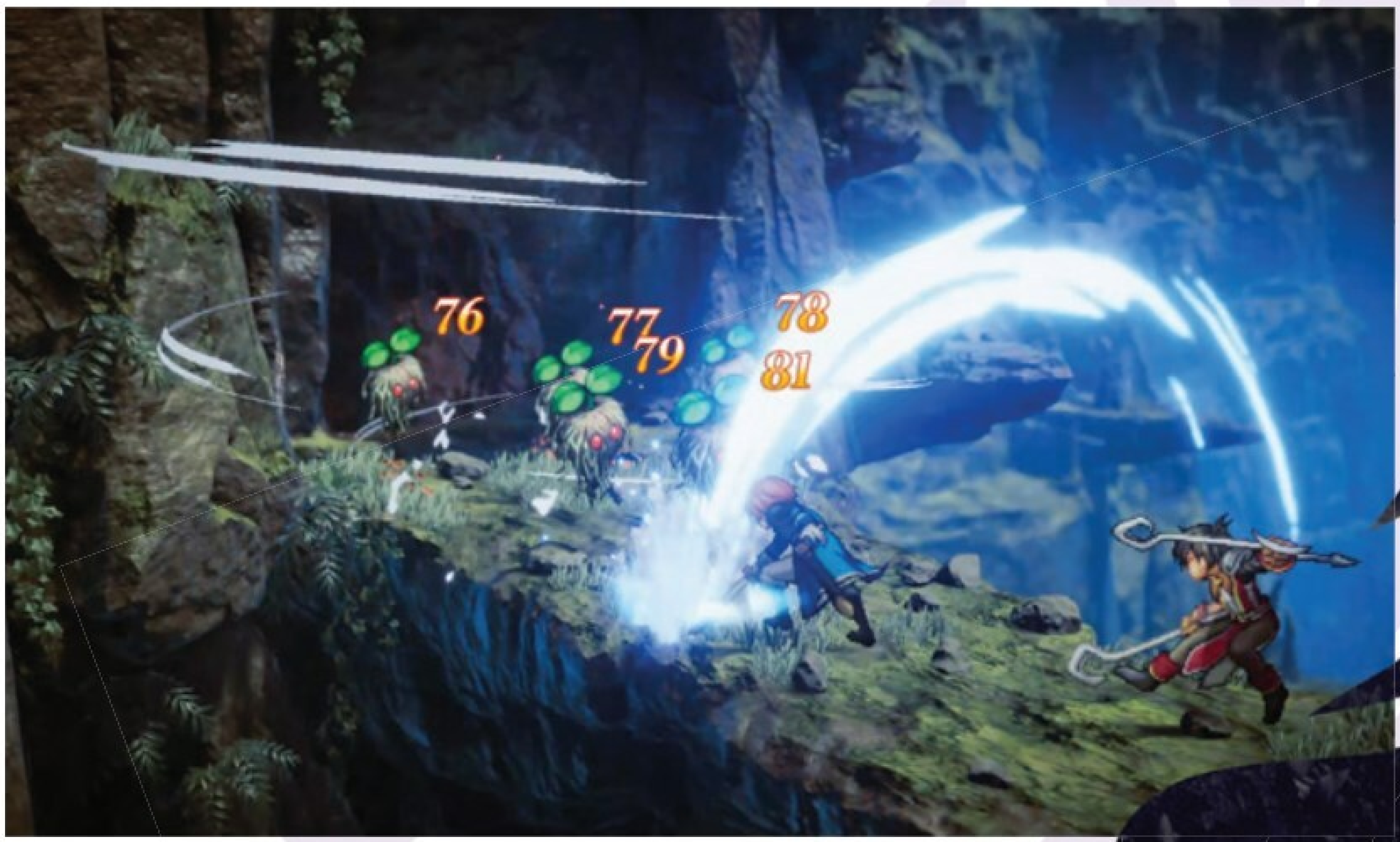


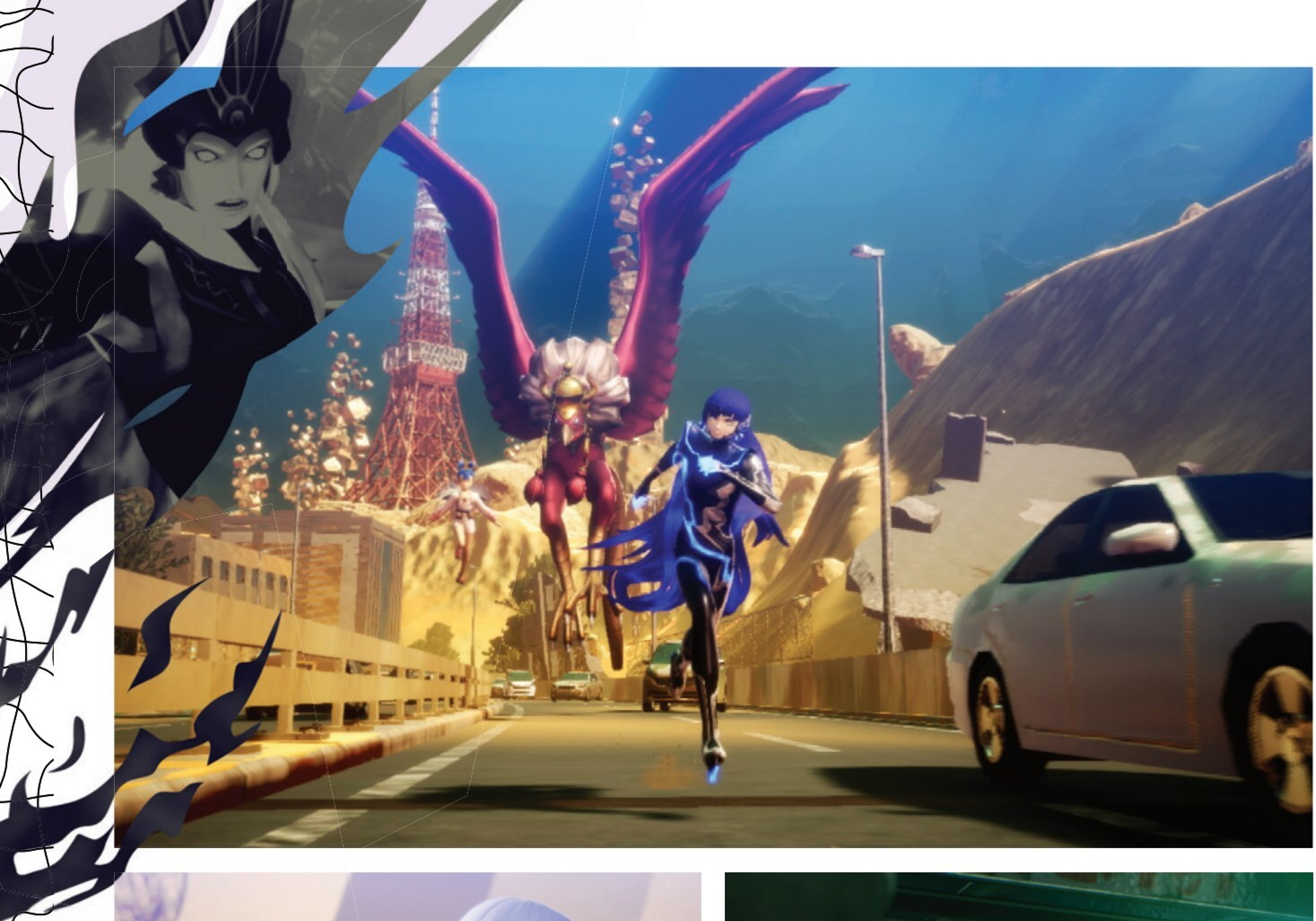


Lian
Seriously! Brace yourselves!

a second game to set the stage

Hundred Heroes is still a long way off, with a release not scheduled until 2023. In the meantime, eager fans may be able to sate their appetite with Eiyuden Chronicle: Rising. Developed by NatsumeAtari, this installment of the fledgling series is planned for release in 2022, ahead of the flagship game. Rising is a prequel story set in the same era and universe as the other game but acts as an introduction to the world and its heroes. “Some characters of Hundred Heroes will appear in Rising as well, and their past will be written,” says Rabbit & Bear studio lead Yoshitaka Murayama. While the project is inextricably linked with the other game, don’t expect the same gameplay. Rising is a city-building action game, with what appears in demos to be some variation of 2D side-scrolling combat.





SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V

Platform: Switch
Release: November 12

The Shin Megami Tensei series has spawned other popular franchises like Persona and Devil Summoner, but longtime fans will tell you that the core SMT franchise has its own identity thanks to dark themes, innovative battle systems, and sometimes punishing difficulty. More than five years after the last mainline entry, the SMT series is making the leap from 3DS to Switch with new features, better visuals, and a new host of demons to battle and befriend.

While fans can now play Shin Megami Tensei III's HD remaster on Switch, SMT V is the first all-new entry for Nintendo's hybrid console. As such, this fifth numbered entry leverages the improved hardware to deliver vastly improved visuals while still staying true to the series' roots.

In SMT V, you step into the shoes of a third-year student living a typical life in the dorms of Jouin High School in Tokyo, Japan. On his way home from school one day, the protagonist and his classmate stumble upon a murder scene in Shinagawa train station. In the chaos, the two are separated and the tunnel the protagonist enters collapses, knocking him unconscious. When he awakens, he's in the middle of a desert, under attack by demons. As he runs for his life, a mysterious man named Aogami offers his assistance. The protagonist and Aogami fuse to become a condemned being that is neither human nor demon: a Nahobino.

After becoming one with Aogami, the protagonist gains several abilities while still retaining control over his body. Guided by Aogami's voice, the protagonist can battle demons or befriend them through negotiation. If you do manage to get a demon on your side, you can visit Sophia in the World of Shadows to create stronger demons through the fusion mechanic.

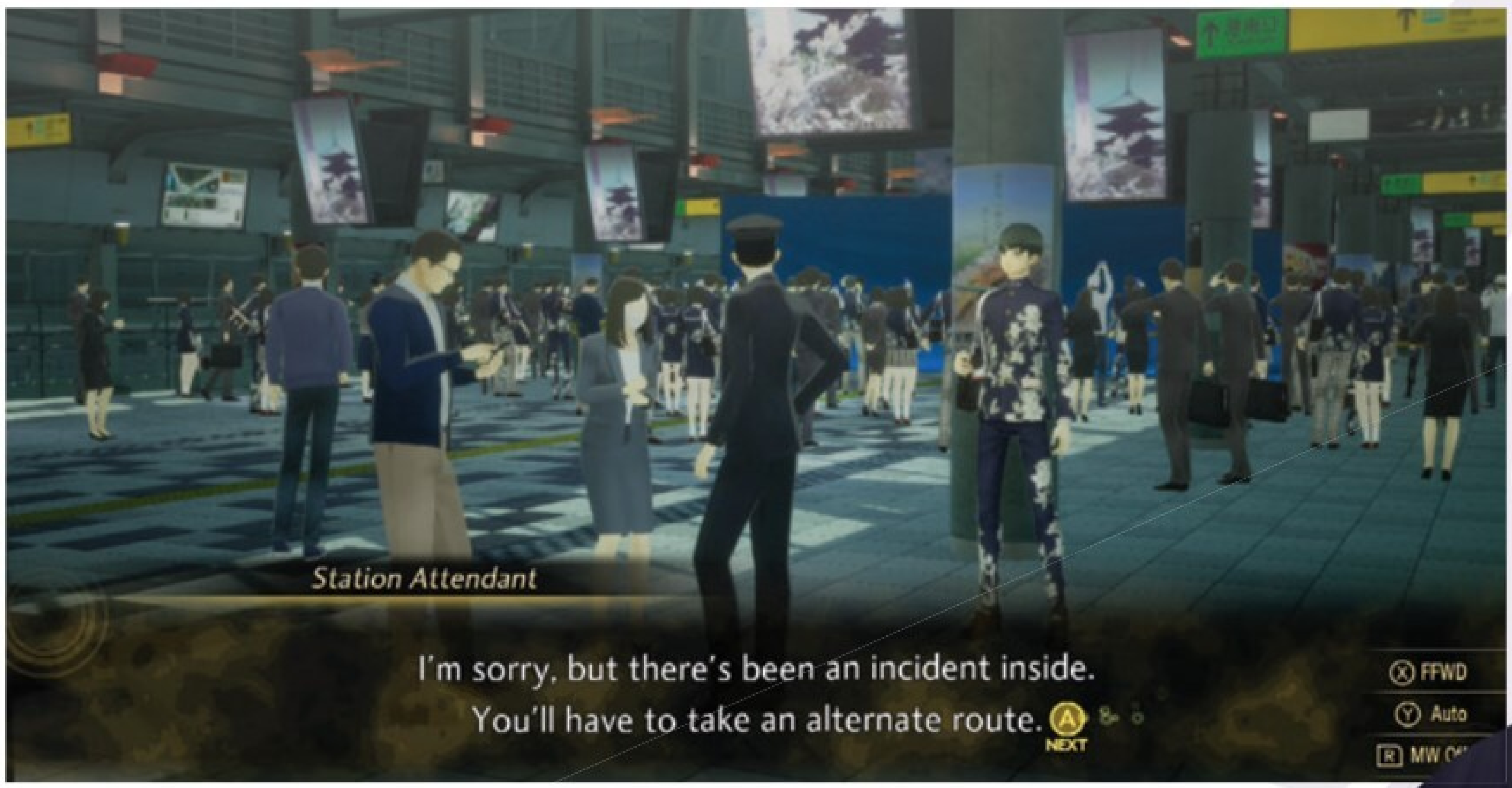
Together, with the power to fight, they travel back to Tokyo only to find it, too, has been overrun by demons. However, this isn't the Tokyo the protagonist came from. Instead, this is an alternate version known as Da'at. In this dimension, deities and demons duke it out in an ongoing fight for survival. While the demons are localized to Da'at for now, they have their sights set on humanity and their Tokyo. Throughout the game, players encounter more than 200 monsters, mythological deities, and even fiends the size of mountains, all with their own affinities, weaknesses, and skills; matching the right skill to an allied demon's affinities can result in more skill potential and strategies that fit your playstyle.

Combat in Shin Megami Tensei V features the standard command-based press-turn battle system, where striking enemy weaknesses can not only give you the upper hand, but also give you more turns with which to execute your plans. You must be careful though, as enemies can also strike your weaknesses and gain the momentum for themselves. All new skills such as Humble Blessing, Maziobarion, and Sanguine Drain allow you to employ a wider range of strategies in combat, while the Magatsuhi Skill system lets your party and your enemies activate special moves that can unleash powerful attacks or provide healing and support at crucial times.

As if learning of an alternate version of Tokyo that's overrun by demons isn't overwhelming enough, the protagonist soon learns he wasn't the only one trapped in Da'at amid the tunnel collapse. After some time, he encounters his classmates Yuzuru Atsuta and Ichiro Dazai, both of whom also have their own close calls with demons in Da'at. After narrowly escaping and meeting up with the protagonist, the trio is able to return to Tokyo. Upon arrival, they chat with another fellow classmate, Tao Isonokami, who informs them of the two parallel versions of Tokyo and confesses she's a member of an organization sworn to fight demons called Bethel. After this revelation, the team joins Bethel to help protect Tokyo from the demonic invasion.

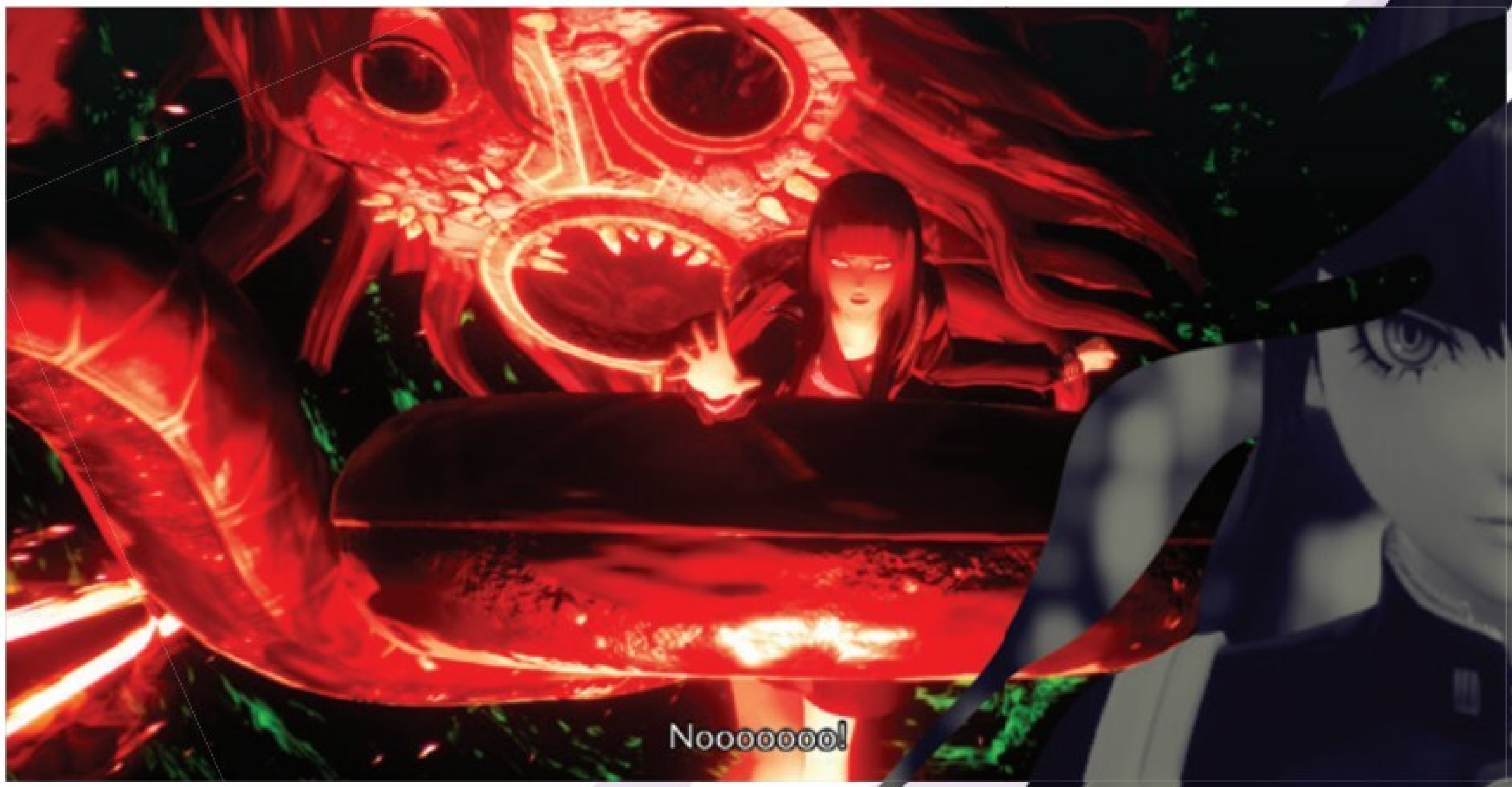
While the protagonist has his own suite of powers as a Nahobino, Yuzuru and Ichiro are hardly helpless. Using the power of the demon summoning program offered by Japan's prime minister and Bethel representative Hayao Koshimizu, the two are capable of assisting the protagonist to battle demons and restore order. Unfortunately, an emergency notice soon arrives from Bethel, alerting the team that demons have appeared throughout Tokyo and it's up to the team to journey to the affected areas – including their own high school – to protect the people of Tokyo. Among the students in danger at Jouin High School is Miyazu Atsuta, Yuzuru's younger sister and only living family member, making this a more personal mission for the team.

It's been a long road to Shin Megami Tensei V, but with various improvements in tow, fans are hopeful that the first all-new entry on the Switch will be worth the wait. However, we still have a few more months before we learn if that hope is properly placed. » ***Brian Shea***



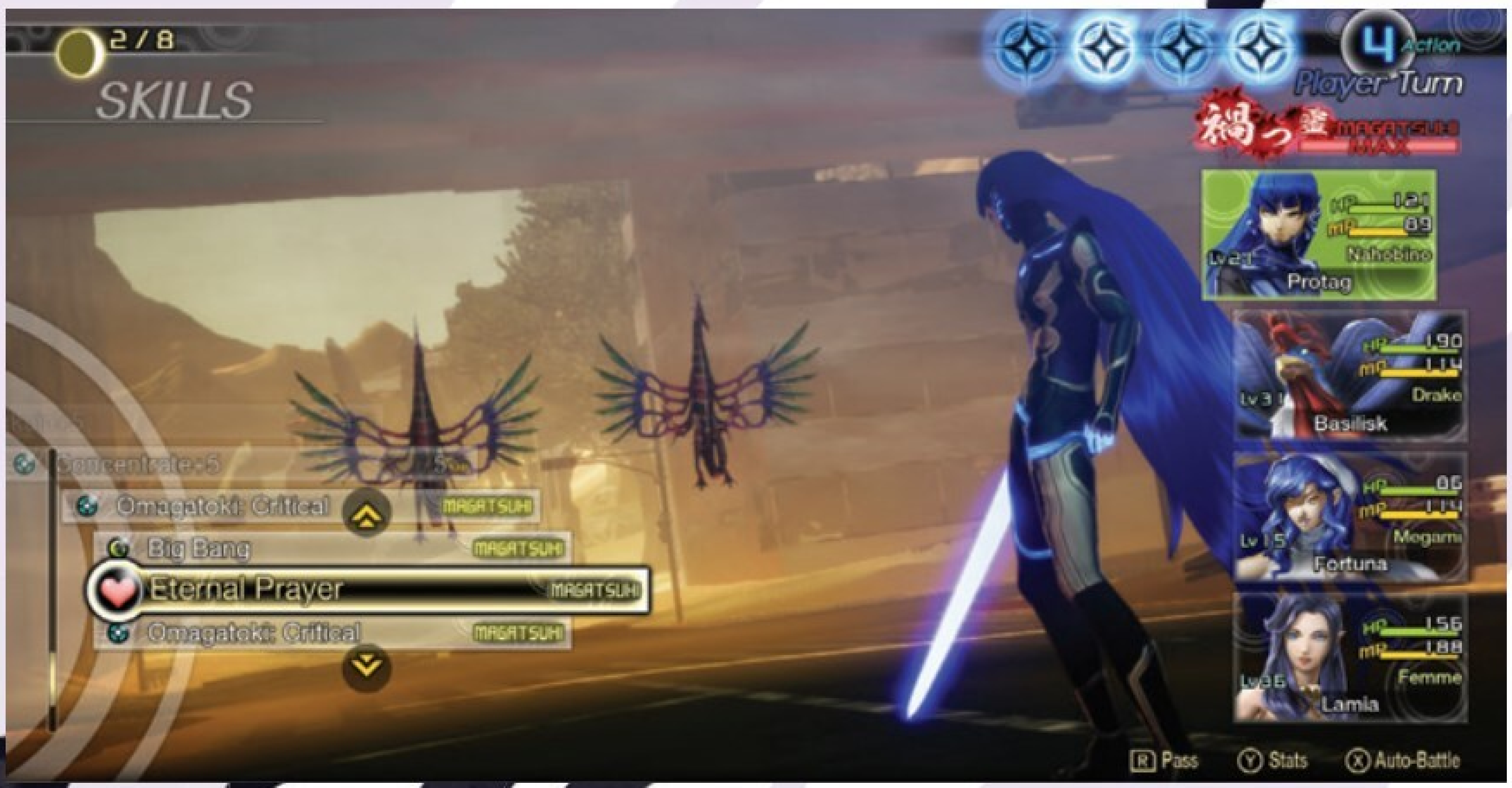
Station Attendant

I'm sorry, but there's been an incident inside.
You'll have to take an alternate route.



Noooooooo!

Young man, if you wish to live, take my hand.



STRANGER OF PARADISE: FINAL FANTASY ORIGIN

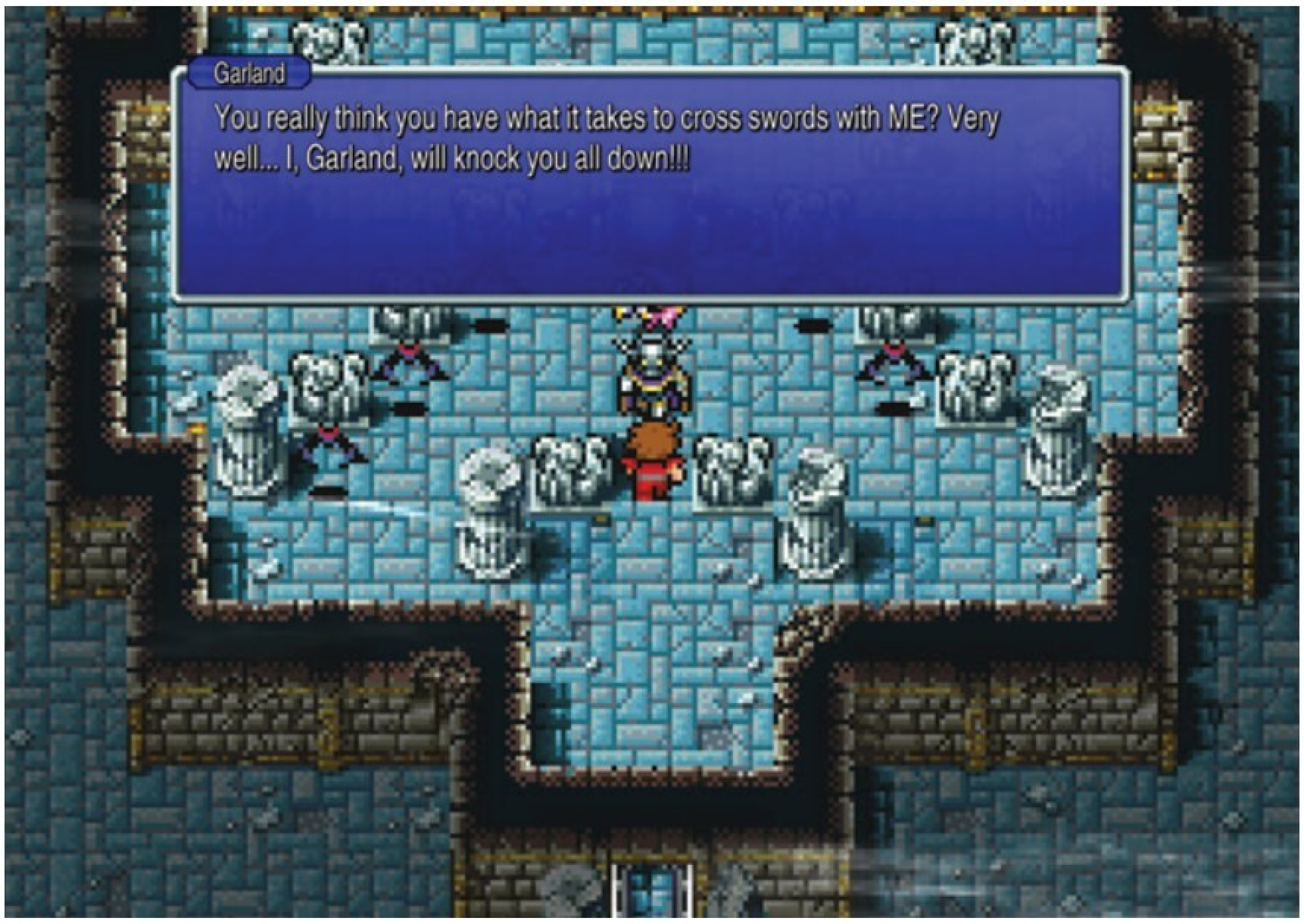
Platform: *PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC*
Release: *2022*

Jack and friends are raiding the Shrine of Chaos to confront classic Final Fantasy villain Garland. Developed by Team Ninja, and featuring Nioh-like real-time action, Jack wields a full suite of Final Fantasy jobs to switch between on the fly allowing him to swing giant swords or sling deadly spells in his attempt to kill Chaos. Final Fantasy VII's Tetsuya Nomura and Kazushige Nojima are assisting with characters and story.

THE OUTER WORLDS 2

Platform: *Xbox Series X/S, PC*
Release: *TBA*

Obsidian Entertainment isn't slowing down. Last year, the studio revealed the fantasy-themed Action/RPG Avowed, and the team currently has its backyard survival sim Grounded in early access development. But, if that isn't enough, the studio just announced a follow-up to its dystopian sci-fi RPG, The Outer Worlds. We don't know much about the title at this point, but Obsidian's reveal trailer happily poked fun at common video game tropes, so the sequel is bound to be full of absurd humor and more jokes about corporate idiocy.



Garland

You really think you have what it takes to cross swords with ME? Very well... I, Garland, will knock you all down!!!

FINAL FANTASY PIXEL REMASTER

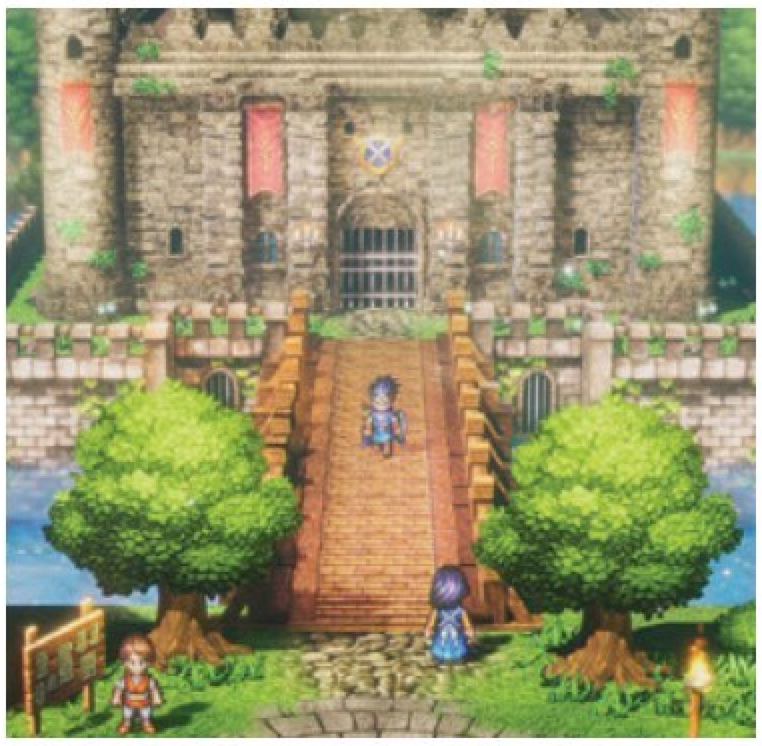
Platform: *PC, iOS, Android*
Release: *July 28 (I, II, and III), 2021 (IV, V, and VI)*

Final Fantasy 1 through 6 are coming back in pixel remaster form. While no console releases have been announced as of yet, these remasters begin to land this month, and should have an easy time usurping the putty-styled U.I. nightmares that have dominated the rereleases of these games until now. If you've never had a chance to play these incredible games, maybe these remasters will be the impetus you need.

DRAGON QUEST III HD-2D REMAKE

Platform: *Consoles TBA*
Release: *TBA*

Between its job system and day/night cycle, Dragon Quest III made a mark when it hit North America in 1992. Now, Square Enix is giving gamers a chance to go back in history with this remake. Details are slim at the moment; no specific consoles have been listed for the platform. With the addition of 3D effects to the pixel-based backgrounds, Square did say to expect "a unique three-dimensional feel." Another bonus? Octopath Traveler's Masaaki Hayasaki is the producer.



STARFIELD

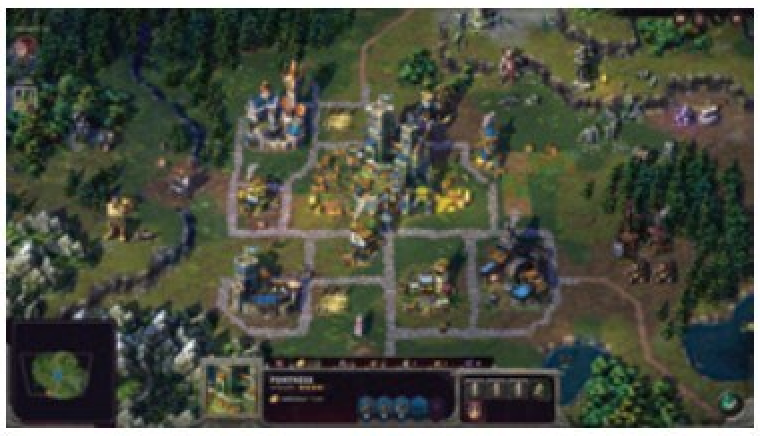
Platform: Xbox Series X/S, PC
Release: November 11, 2022

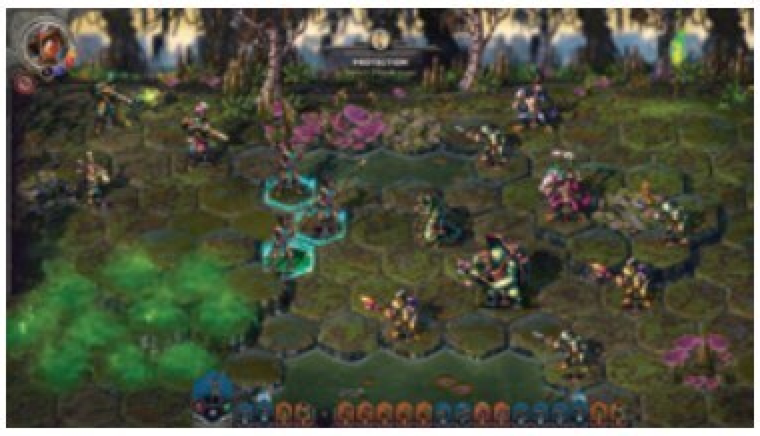
The developer behind The Elder Scrolls and Fallout is prepping its first foray into a new universe in 25 years. While we still don't know much about this highly anticipated release, lead game designer Todd Howard describes the project as "Skyrim in space." Players create their own character and explore outer space as part of an organization called Constellation. We have a long wait ahead for the holiday season of 2022.

HOGWARTS LEGACY

Platform: PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release: 2022

Originally planned for release in 2021 and delayed into 2022, fans of the wizarding world have to wait a bit longer for a trip back in time to an 1800s version of the world's most recognizable school of magic. The open-world action/RPG lets players create their own wizard or witch-in-training, and even choose which of the four houses to join. Questions abound regarding how spellcasting and combat functions, as well as the game's promised system to handle morality, but we just want to know what's going to happen if you drink too much butterbeer.

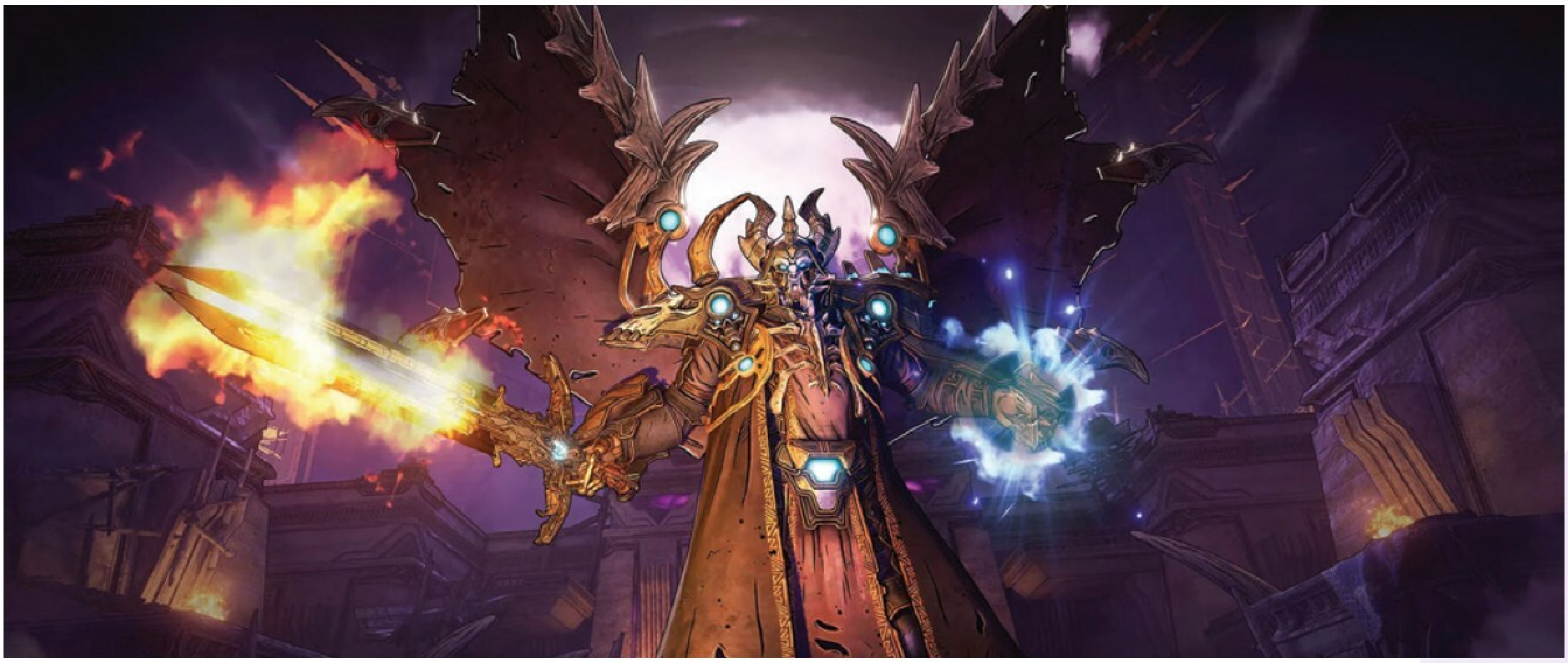




SONGS OF CONQUEST

Platform: PC
Release: Early 2022

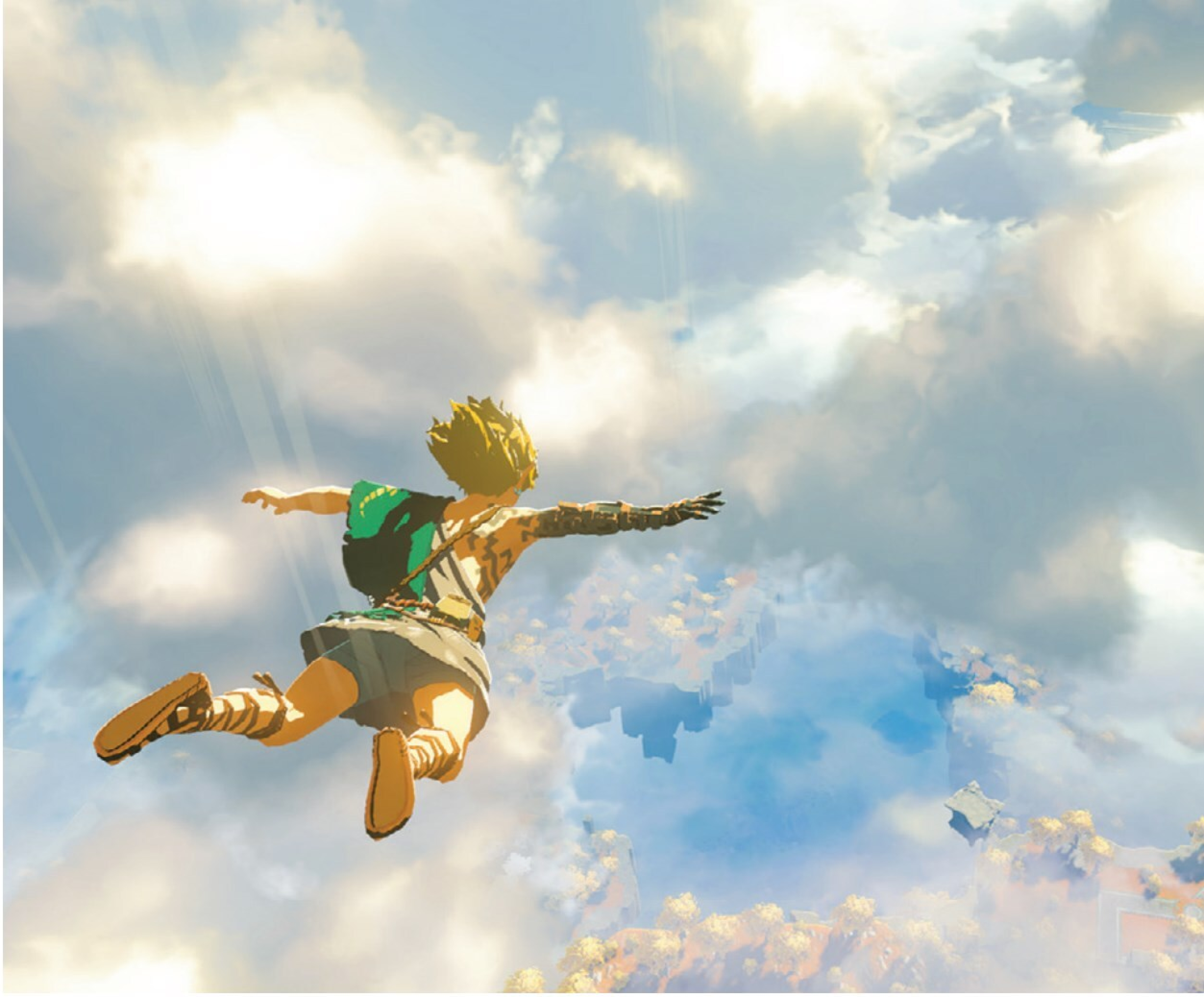
Ever since the classic strategy Heroes of Might and Magic series slowly faded away into a mire of mobile games, players have been yearning for the classic gameplay of the old-school series. Well, Songs of Conquest aims to be just that – a modern iteration on games like the eternal Heroes of Might and Magic II and III. Whether or not it can live up to that legacy is the big question, but it certainly has our attention going into next year.



TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS

Platform: PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release: 2022

Tiny Tina is back and ready to turn the fantasy world on its head. The galaxy's deadliest 13-year-old from the Borderlands franchise gets her own standalone game, pairing what we love from the mainstay Gearbox series and blending it into a new world where dragons, goblins, skeletons, and more have taken over. Much like her expansion in Borderlands 2, Tiny Tina's Wonderlands is heavily inspired by Dungeons & Dragons, and voices like Will Arnett (*Arrested Development*), Wanda Sykes (*Curb Your Enthusiasm*), and Andy Samberg (*Brooklyn 99*) are helping bring this new adventure to life. ◆



The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild Sequel

Sky-high expectations

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
Nintendo

» Release
2022

At this year's E3, we finally got a glimpse at gameplay for the upcoming sequel to one of Nintendo's most beloved modern games, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. The initial reveal trailer showed Link and Zelda traveling through an eerie underground cavern featuring paintings of Ganondorf on the walls, with the Demon King himself at rest in the center. Following Ganondorf's emaciated body seemingly springing back to life, Hyrule Castle breaks free from the ground and rises into the sky.

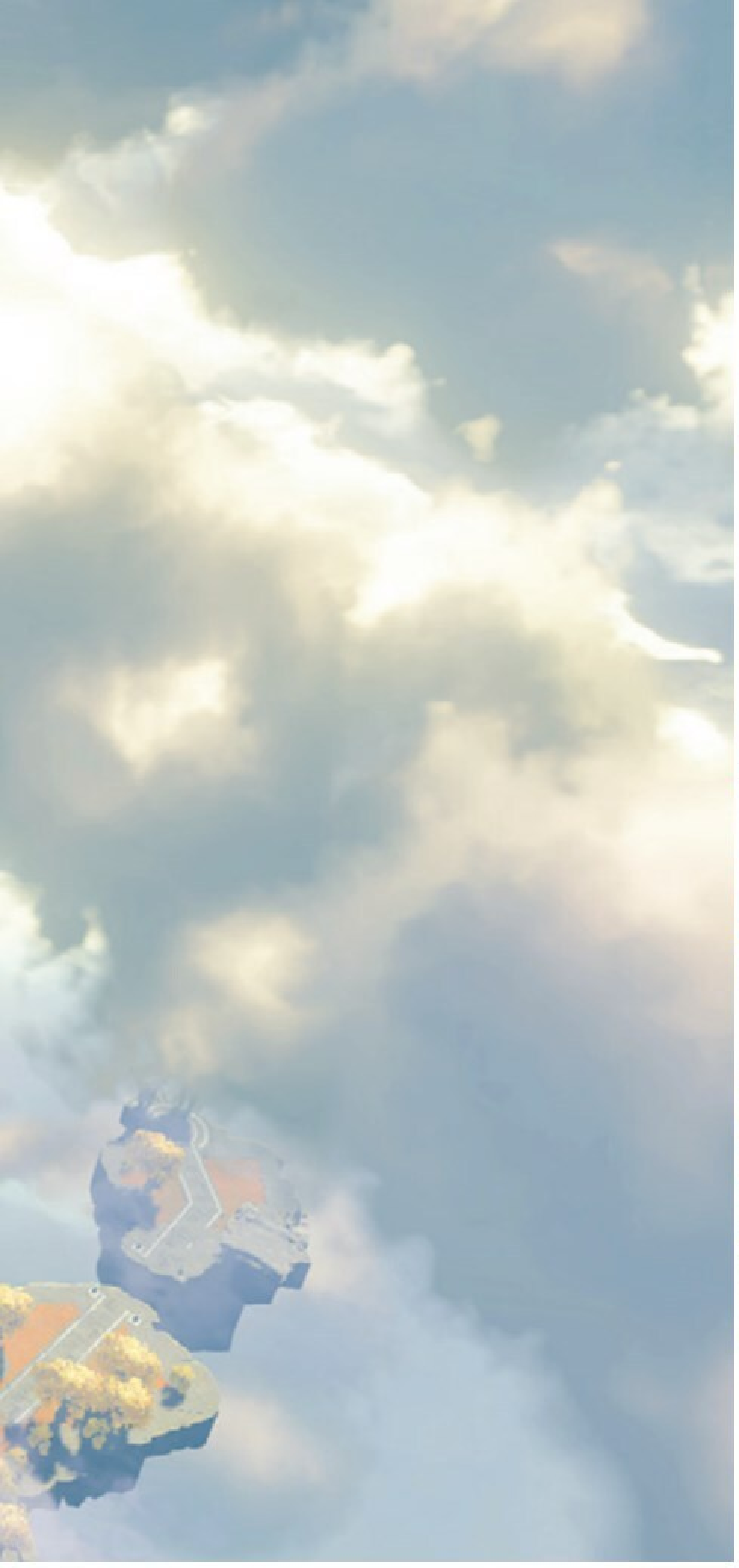
As showcased by the newest trailer, the ghastly discovery the two heroes make during their underground expedition seems to have wide-ranging and haunting implications for both them and the kingdom of Hyrule at large. In the opening seconds, Link's arm is consumed by the dark Malice energy emanating from Ganondorf's body, and the ground collapses beneath Zelda and she falls into the abyss. The new teaser doesn't dwell on that scene for long, though, as it quickly transitions to Link freefalling from the sky, providing our first glimpse at the sequel's emphasis on verticality.

As Link skydives and glides high above the ground we so thoroughly explored in Breath of the Wild, you get a sense of how truly vast the world is in the sequel. Not only can Link journey through floating islands and platforms in the sky, but he can travel to the ground and run through the fields of Hyrule once again. This expanded scope opens myriad exploration options, but it's not just the setting that grants Link more opportunities.

As the first seconds of the new trailer indicate, Link's arm is corrupted by Malice, the same powerful substance that impeded his path and spawned enemies throughout Hyrule and the Divine Beasts in the first game. During Breath of the Wild, Ganon used a combination of Malice and technology to restore his physical form before Link interrupted the process for the final confrontation. While Link's arm looks affected by this corruption throughout the footage, we also saw his corrupted arm brings new powers.

In one section, some bokoblins and moblins push a large, spiked ball down a hill at Link, but he rewinds time for that object by reaching out his arm, causing it to reverse course up the hill and bowl them over instead. Imagery in the trailer indicates that Link will have some control over the flow of time; a quick sequence shows a puddle reforming as a large raindrop and floating upward, leaving the ground dry. It will be interesting to see how much Nintendo leans into these mechanics for puzzles and combat.

Link's powers don't appear to be solely focused on reversing the flow of time. In another part of the trailer, Link flies upward and phases through



the bottom of a floating platform to emerge on top of it. In a combat-focused scene, Link has a flamethrower attached to his shield as he battles an enemy.

The latest trailer ends with Hyrule Castle floating ominously over the kingdom, kept aloft by the same power that corrupted Link's arm. Just as Calamity Ganon visibly circled Hyrule Castle throughout your adventure in Breath of the Wild, Hyrule Castle seems like it might float just out of reach in the sequel, giving you a stark reminder of what exactly you're fighting for and what kind of power you're up against.

Interestingly, Nintendo still refuses to provide the game's actual name, officially referring to it across its various channels as "Sequel to The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild." While this is somewhat frustrating for fans, director of product marketing Bill Trinen told *IGN* the company has good reason for keeping its lips sealed just a bit longer. "As for why we're holding back on the name, you'll just have to stay tuned because, obviously, Zelda names are kind of important," he said in an interview after E3 2021. "Those subtitles … they start to give little bits of hints about maybe what's going to happen."

While this approach has led the community to wildly speculate about the actual title and the very nature of the game itself, those theories may have to sustain us until the next big information drop from Nintendo. We may still be largely in the dark about this title, but we do know that Breath of the Wild director Hidemaro Fujibayashi is reprising his role and that we should expect to dive back into this gorgeous rendition of Hyrule sometime in 2022. » **Brian Shea**

Halo Infinite

Drawing on the old to make something new

» Platform
Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(24-Player Online)

» Publisher
Xbox Game Studios

» Developer
343 Industries

» Release
Holiday

After years of waiting, the Halo series' next installment is nearly here. 343 Industries is ramping up communications on the long-in-gestation project, and a lot of what the team is showing off should be heartening to longtime fans. After some justifiable frustration about some of the decisions made around both storytelling and multiplayer in 2015's Halo 5: Guardians, this new mainline entry is clearly looking to recapture fan enthusiasm through a mix of nostalgic elements and some very fancy new tech and tools.

Until the last few weeks, it's been hard to glean much about the developer's plans for multiplayer, but after a recent press conference, the picture is far clearer. Infinite's multiplayer suite is robust and nuanced, with a free-to-play model that invites everyone to the party, but a philosophy that feels more like what you'd expect from a premium multiplayer offering.

The core multiplayer package is split up between arena and big-team battle modes and a dedicated onboarding area called the Academy, where players can get basic tutorials, weapon drilling, and training modes. In the 4v4 Arena, 343 is focusing on fair and balanced play at the starting line. This way, it can nail that classic Halo experience of scavenging for fun weapons and other tools throughout play, followed by combining those goodies into fun combos of slaying action. The larger big team battles support up to 24 players in a match, upping the chaos from the max of 16 combatants in previous installments. That ensures some truly wild moments, filled with vehicles, weapon drop pods, and explosive clashes.

The team at 343 Industries clearly recognizes vehicular combat as a distinguishing feature of Halo multiplayer, and is putting emphasis on this with Infinite. Vehicles now feature a full damage modeling system, where blown-out tires and exploded hoods affect the vehicle's handling. This addition provides doomsday push-your-luck moments; after everything catches fire, do you try to get in that last kill before the vehicle explodes?

We also got a good look at the new Razorback vehicle, a cousin of the Warthog that carries several players at once. While it lacks weapons of its own, it includes storage that lets players transport detachable turrets, fusion coils, and even game objectives across the map. We also glimpsed some thrilling moments using the new grapple mechanic, like one exchange where a player grappled up to a passing Banshee midflight, hijacking the vehicle as it zipped across the sky.

Additionally, Big Team Battles have many more dynamic drops, including weapon pods with high-damage armaments, as well as Pelicans dropping in

vehicles to keep the match fresh. These large-scale vehicle-focused fights honestly looked overwhelming.

Beyond the battles themselves, Infinite is built around deep customization features for your multiplayer avatar. Your Spartan goes into battle with a customized personal A.I., which features its own voice and personality. While the developers stopped short of promising it, that feature has the potential for tremendous future growth, especially around dedicated celebrity-voiced A.I. and other fun additions. Visual customization is entirely cosmetic and won't affect gameplay, but a lot of variety is at players' fingertips. Armor parts can be changed out, including the first-time option for prosthetics. Along with armor coatings, emblems, armor effects, and more, players can also expect options to customize the appearance of both weapons and vehicles. And thanks to the robust Halo Waypoint app, you should be able to tweak these customization tools on your phone or other devices ahead of heading home for your evening matchmaking.

Halo Infinite is also making waves with its novel approach to battle passes and seasonal play. While both are present, battle passes never expire. As each new seasons starts, you can purchase the new related battle pass, but you can always choose to designate a prior pass to receive the benefits of your progression. If there's a reward you're chasing, there's no fear of missing out if you simply don't have enough time to play before the season turns over. Plus, all customization elements are single-source, so there's a very clear, deterministic, and singular method to acquire them. For instance, a helmet earned by completing an in-game objective is distinct from one gained through the season pass.

Meanwhile, new seasons come along roughly every three months, and each pushes your multiplayer Spartan forward through the Halo universe and its story. The opening season is called Heroes of Reach, and promises to harken back to that important planet in the franchise's history.

No matter where you play, your progression carries back and forth between platforms on PC or console. Since the full multiplayer experience is free-to-play, there's good reason to expect a large and active community. Even so, if competitive play is a bit intimidating, 343 Industries is also implementing A.I. bots at a range of difficulties, allowing you to hone your skills outside of the crucible of true PvP.

With the wealth of new multiplayer details, campaign enthusiasts shouldn't feel left in the dust. Master Chief's journey to the gigantic Zeta ring still looks tantalizing, and we even got introduced to a new A.I. companion – a seemingly naïve smart A.I. that looks like Cortana, but lacks her knowledge or experiences. It's only one small detail in what promises to be a much larger and more complex story that is yet to be revealed. Still, it's getting harder and harder to wait for the complete experience, as longtime fans stand by to find out if Infinite is the installment that returns the franchise to its best-in-class status.

» **Matt Miller**

Metroid Dread

Fusing old with new

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
MercurySteam

» Release
October 8

Nearly two decades after the last 2D Metroid game, fans are finally receiving a follow-up. MercurySteam, the development studio behind Samus Returns, the excellent 2017 Metroid 2 remake, is back with a completely new 2D adventure set after the events of 2002's Metroid Fusion.

Metroid Dread puts you back into the power armor of the iconic Samus Aran, blasting your way through an alien planet. After a transmission sent to the Galactic Federation summons Samus to the mysterious ZDR, she quickly discovers hostile alien life has overrun it. Even worse, robots known as EMMI patrol various rooms of the underground network and relentlessly pursue any intruders. Samus may be a formidable warrior, but not even her missiles can make a dent in these robotic creatures; her only options are avoiding them or running for her life.

Thankfully, Samus is nimbler than ever, and she'll need to tap into her full moveset to survive EMMI robot encounters. If an EMMI catches Samus, it's an instant death unless the player executes a counter during a narrow window, allowing the bounty hunter to escape the robot's clutches. Her only chance to stand toe-to-toe with an EMMI (that we know of so far) is to find the temporary Omega Cannon power-up, which can blast through their thick armor.

If you played Metroid Fusion, this gameplay convention might sound familiar. That's because SA-X, the powerful parasitic mimic of Samus, served as the main inspiration for the development team. Because SA-X was so much more powerful than Samus, she had no choice but to run or hide from it. The EMMI encounters create a similar feeling as they chase you down. These looming threats add extra layers of anxiety and tension to situations, enabling Dread to live up to its name.

Despite these EMMI encounters serving as a focal point, Metroid Dread still delivers a ton of traditional Metroid action. Players can expect plenty of running, jumping, and blasting en route to discovering powers that open new possibilities. Samus must reroute fuel to open new paths in one sequence, while another section is full of enemies for her to pick apart. Samus has her standard moves and some of the abilities MercurySteam gave her in Samus Returns, like the Free-Aim and timed melee counter mechanics.

Metroid Dread looks to close out the five-part story arc that began in the original 1987 Metroid and continued with Metroid II: Return of Samus, Super Metroid, and Metroid Fusion, but Nintendo already has plans for what's next for the franchise. "Nobody wants the Metroid series to end, and we know that," says Nintendo producer Yoshio Sakamoto. "We ourselves don't want that either, but we just want people to know that there is some kind of new episode that is waiting in the works. We want you to look forward to what we do with that next, but there are no specifics now."

Judging from what I saw, Metroid Dread looks to be the 2D revival fans have been clamoring for over the last couple of decades. The exploration and combat appear true to the series' most classic entries; the tense encounters with the EMMI combined with that core formula promise a stellar continuation of Samus' galactic journey.
» Brian Shea

25 / 25
E 59

27 / 27
E 89

Redfall

A psychologically-driven vampire FPS from Arkane Austin

» **Platform**
Xbox Series X/S • PC

» **Style**
4-Player Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**
Arkane Studios Austin

» **Release**
2022

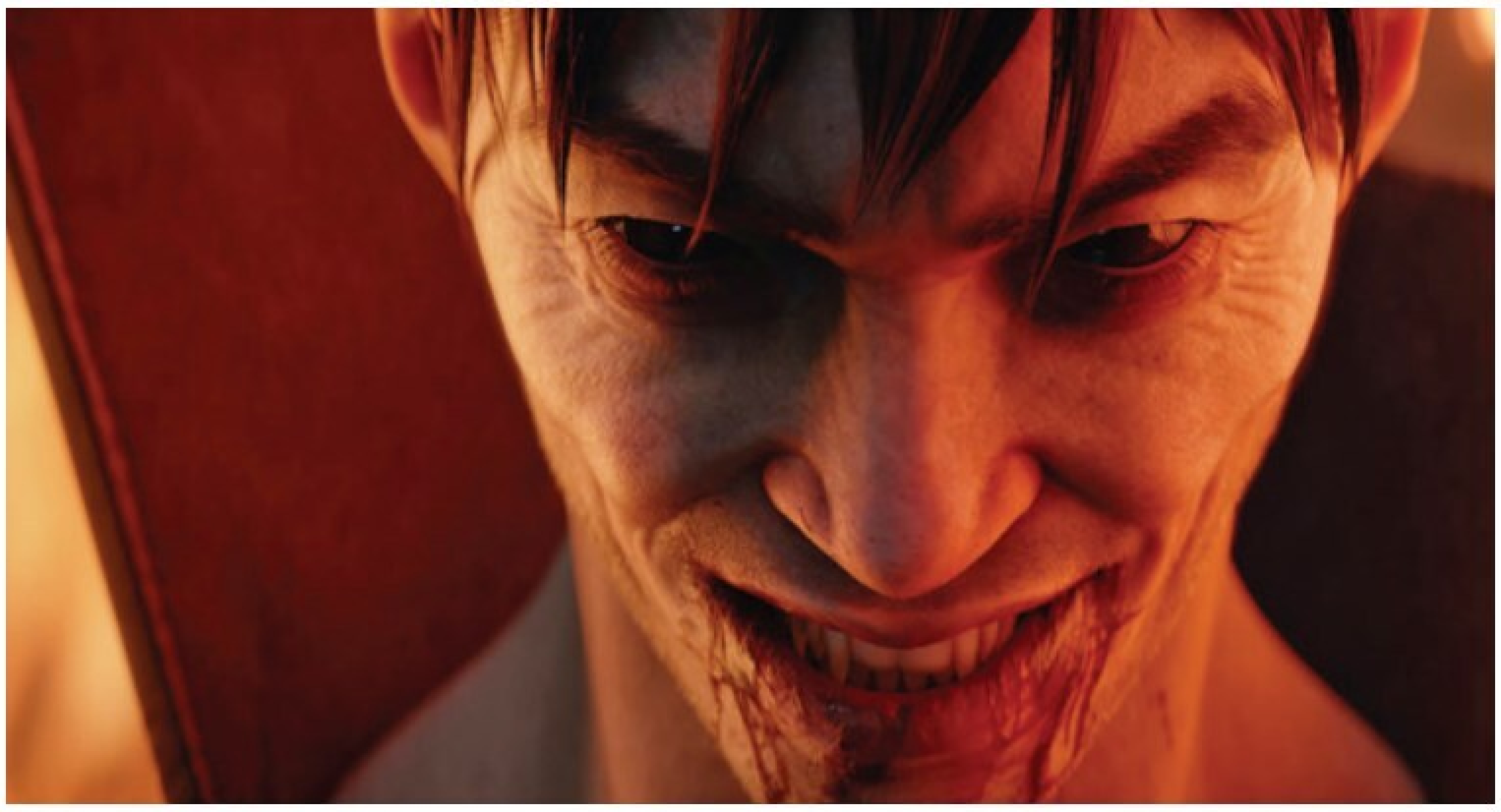
Redfall is a brand new IP from Arkane Studios Austin, the studio behind 2017's Prey. However, this time, we're not going to space, we're going to vamp town.

Redfall can be played solo or with a team of four friends, all with the task of going up against hordes of dangerous vampires looking for their next kill. Redfall is a tiny little island town that is pretty boring. That peaceful quiet vanishes when vampires decide to make it an all-you-can-eat buffet. Luckily, we have some remarkable characters to help make sure that if we all do go down, at least we can go down on our terms.

Players choose their path when taking the fight to the vamps by selecting between a few unique characters. Each playable character has their own special abilities and gear they like to bring to battle, and you can locate more customizable weapons as you explore the island. You must do whatever it takes to build the perfect vampire slayers, according to Arkane Austin.

Redfall has four different heroes to mold to perfection. First, there's Devinder Crousley, an influencr whose claim to fame is in the realm of all things paranormal. His investigates the extraordinary, and he's also a pretty nifty inventor. Want cool gear? He's your guy; he can basically make it all.

Layla Ellison is a biomedical engineer, and she has a connection to the sudden takeover. When in attendance at the mysterious Aevum Therapeutics research facility, Layla recalls that something very wrong happened there, but she can't remember exactly what it was. Whatever happened, it gave her awesome telekinetic powers, effectively turning the vamp hunter into a powerful supernatural wizard.

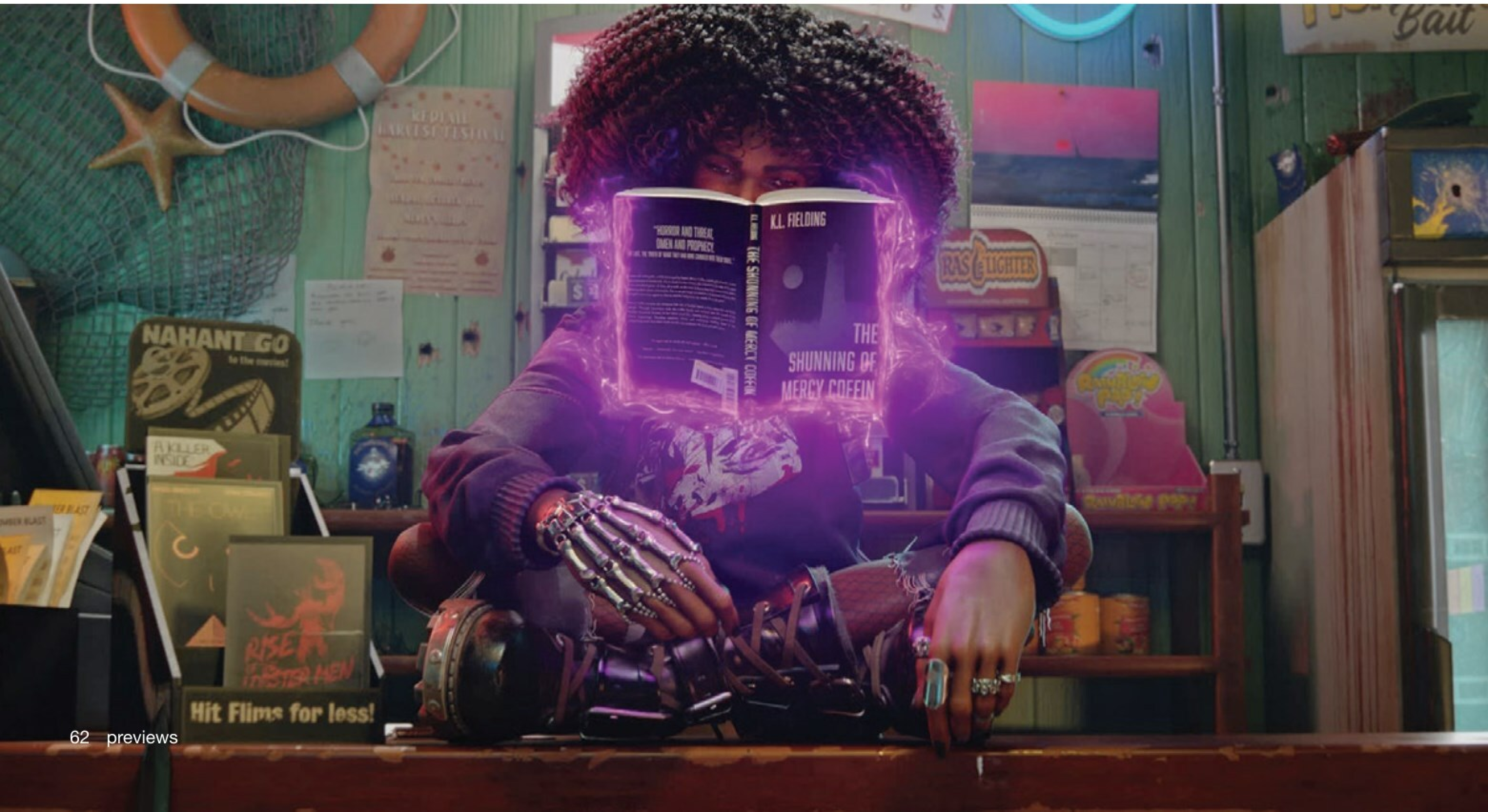


Remi de la Rosa is a combat engineer, and is likely more intelligent than everyone else around her. She used to be a part of an elite Navy rescue force, but now she's taking her talents to fight the undead instead. And she's got a spiffy robot companion called Bribon.

Lastly, there's Jacob Boyer, another character with a military background. Jacob is a sharpshooter that lands his mark every time. He also has a weird vampiric eye and a spectral raven that acts as his partner.

The vampires in Redfall aren't the undead you grew up with. These vamps are a scientific experiment gone horribly wrong, and then evolution decided to step in and up the ante. Once unleashed, these vampires continue to evolve, eventually turning into their most powerful selves. Scientific warfare, psychological mind games, psychic powers, good 'ol fashioned murder? They're bringing it all to the fight. Players also find themselves fighting other humans, drawn from a group of cultists dedicated to worshiping the island's powerful leaders. Their ultimate goal? To become vampires themselves. No matter who you're fighting, expect Arkane's undead invasion to bust through the door sometime in 2022.

» **Liana Ruppert**


Bait
K.L. FIELDING
THE SHUNNING OF MERCY COFFIN
THE SHUNNING OF MERCY COFFIN
NAHANT GO
to the movies!
A KILLER INSIDE
RISE OF THE OYSTER MEN
Hit Flims for less!

Far Cry 6

The heavy price of revolution

Far Cry 6 is the latest entry in the beloved Ubisoft franchise, this time showing players the price of revolution and what's on the line when a ruler has more pride than sense.

Set in the fictional Caribbean island of Yara, central villain Anton Castillo's dictatorship style is heavily inspired by his father, the island's former president. After dear old dad's execution when the people of Yara rebelled, Anton grew up fixated on the belief that this island was stolen from his family. As he grew up, the idea of control became enticing as the Castillo family continued to grow in power. When the son eventually became El Presidente, he sought to rebuild Yara in his own image.

Rebellion, unlike lightning, does often strike in the same place twice, as evidenced by everything we've seen of Far Cry 6 so far. Luckily, we don't have to join the fight alone. Ubisoft is providing a few different choices for companions this time around, including the ability to choose a vicious crocodile or an adorable wiener dog by the name of Chorizo. Additionally, the team is also putting the power of creation into our hands, giving us many ways to craft the weapons we want to take into battle.

With new features, new characters, and a brand-new storyline, a few legacy aspects of the franchise won't make their way into Far Cry 6. Ubisoft confirmed Far Cry 6 does not have a Map Editor or Arcade Mode, marking a new path for future games. At the present time, the studio has no plans to bring back Arcade Mode in any forthcoming Far Cry titles, though the outpouring of feedback from disappointed fans may cause a change of heart in the future.

The reasoning for forgoing Arcade Mode in favor of focusing on the single-player experience is sound, especially with some fans feeling Far Cry may have hit a snag, much like Assassin's Creed did before that team took some time off from the annual release cycle. Focusing more on what makes the game special is important, but it's hard to deny many will miss this aspect of Far Cry. The ability to create almost anything you want using Far Cry assets is a creative challenge too hard to ignore, but the team wants to focus on the story mode instead, which is great news for those craving a robust new adventure. » **Liana Ruppert**

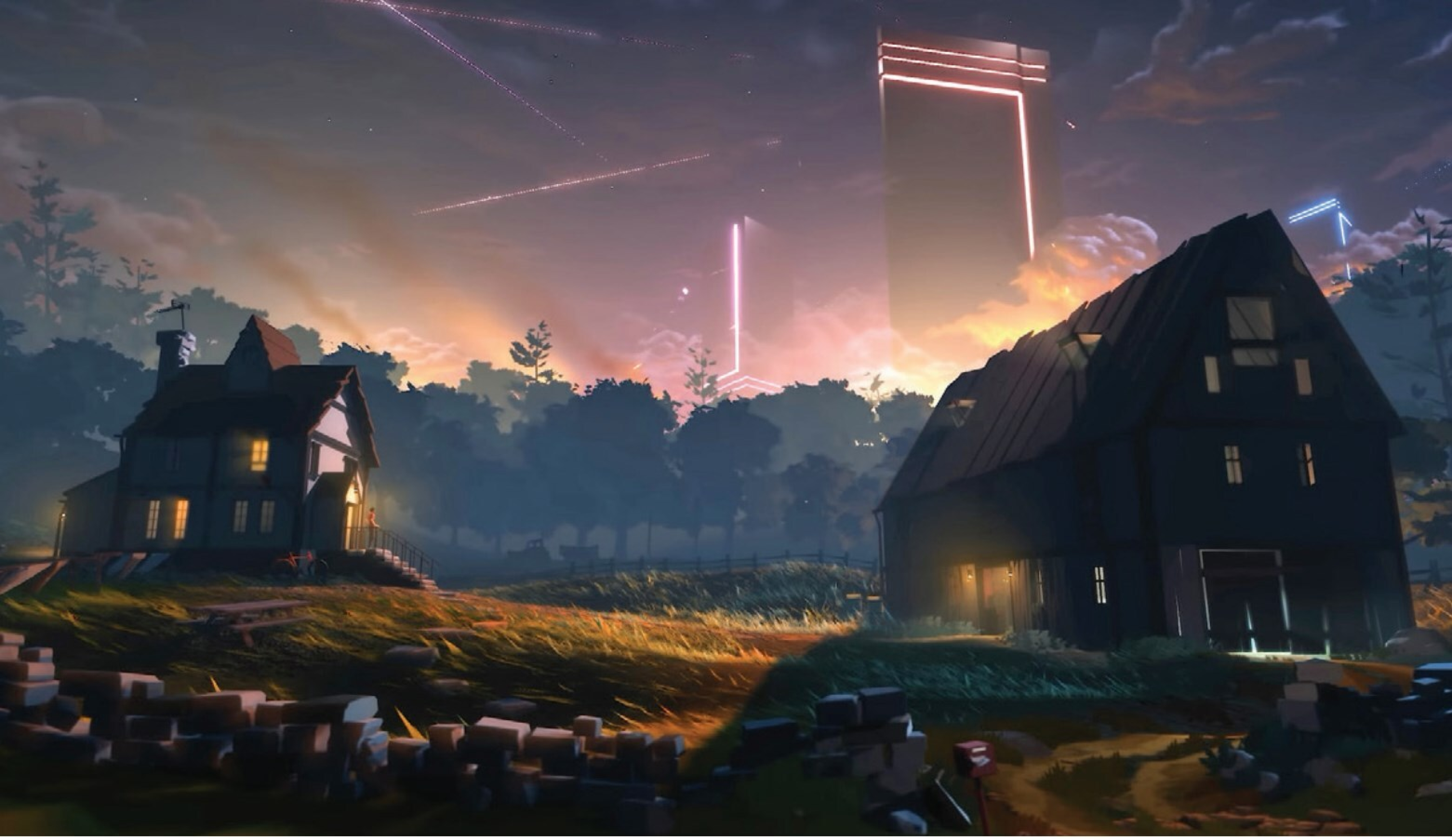
» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC • Mac

» Style
1-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Toronto

» Release
October 7



Somerville

Close encounters

» Platform
Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Adventure

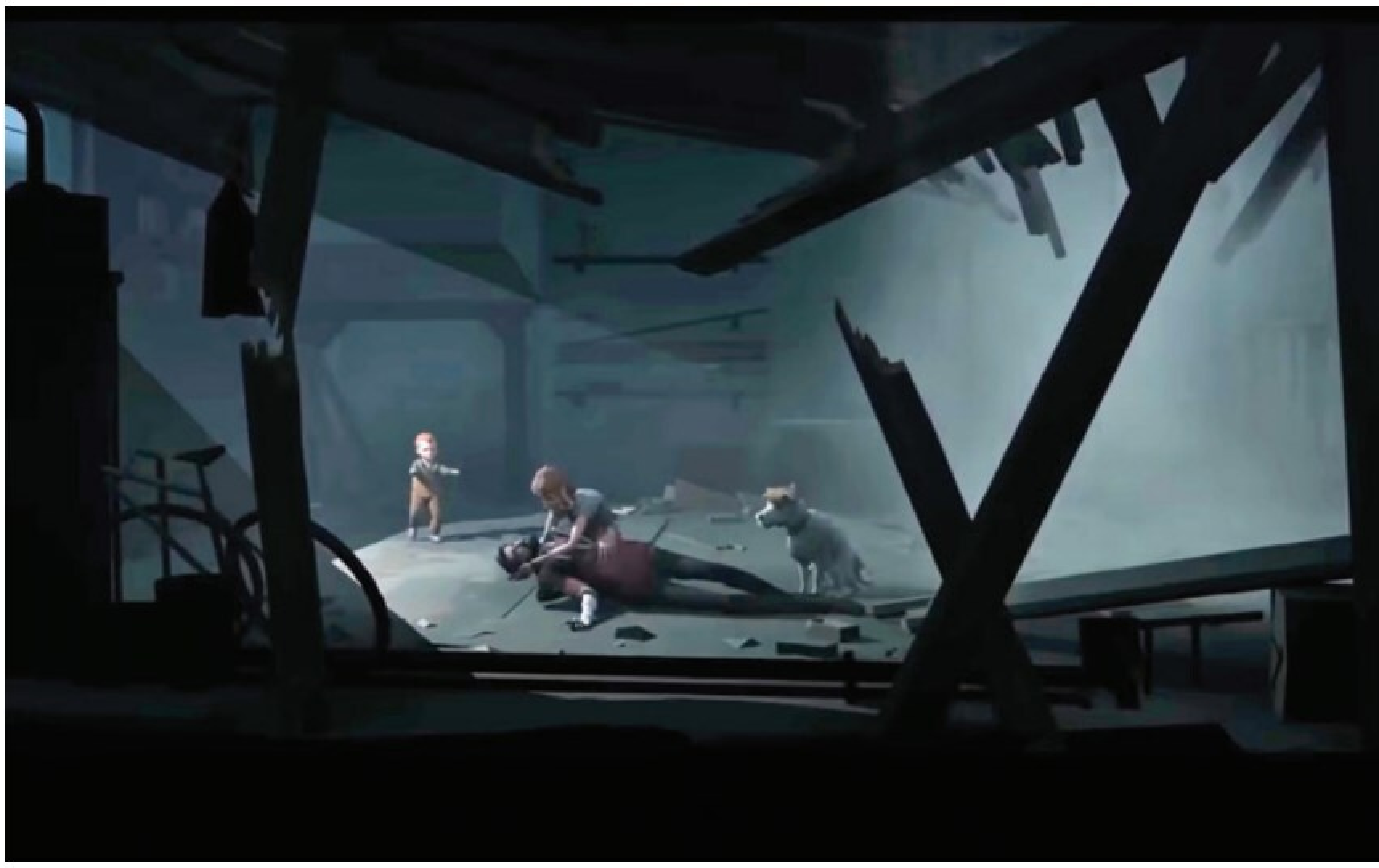
» Publisher
Jumpship

» Developer
Jumpship

» Release
2022

Rows of suspended pillars cast long shadows over the weathered prairie as purple holographic beams flicker in the distance, scanning for human survivors in some abandoned commune. A lone man and his trusty dog watch in silence from atop a cliff. The Earth is in ruins; the landscape riddled with ceaseless flames and crumbling rubble. But despite the terror engulfing the planet, this moment is a temporary respite from past hardships and the ones that undoubtedly await. The man must eventually return to his family and find a way to survive yet another day. From the visuals alone, it's apparent that Jumpship's Somerville is setting out to tell a personal, relatable story; this is a tale about a powerful familial bond threatened by a catastrophe.

Narrative information about Somerville is still scarce, but the main objective is to keep your family safe while navigating a beautiful, but dangerous, rural environment. With a baby to protect, you must lead the charge with your wife and dog through marshy forests, across open meadows, and along empty town streets. You're mainly on the run as aliens scour every nook and cranny of your homeland, and you'll undoubtedly meet unlikely allies along the way. Ultimately, the family gets swept up into an intergalactic struggle which will give everyone better insight into Earth's mysterious, volatile visitors.

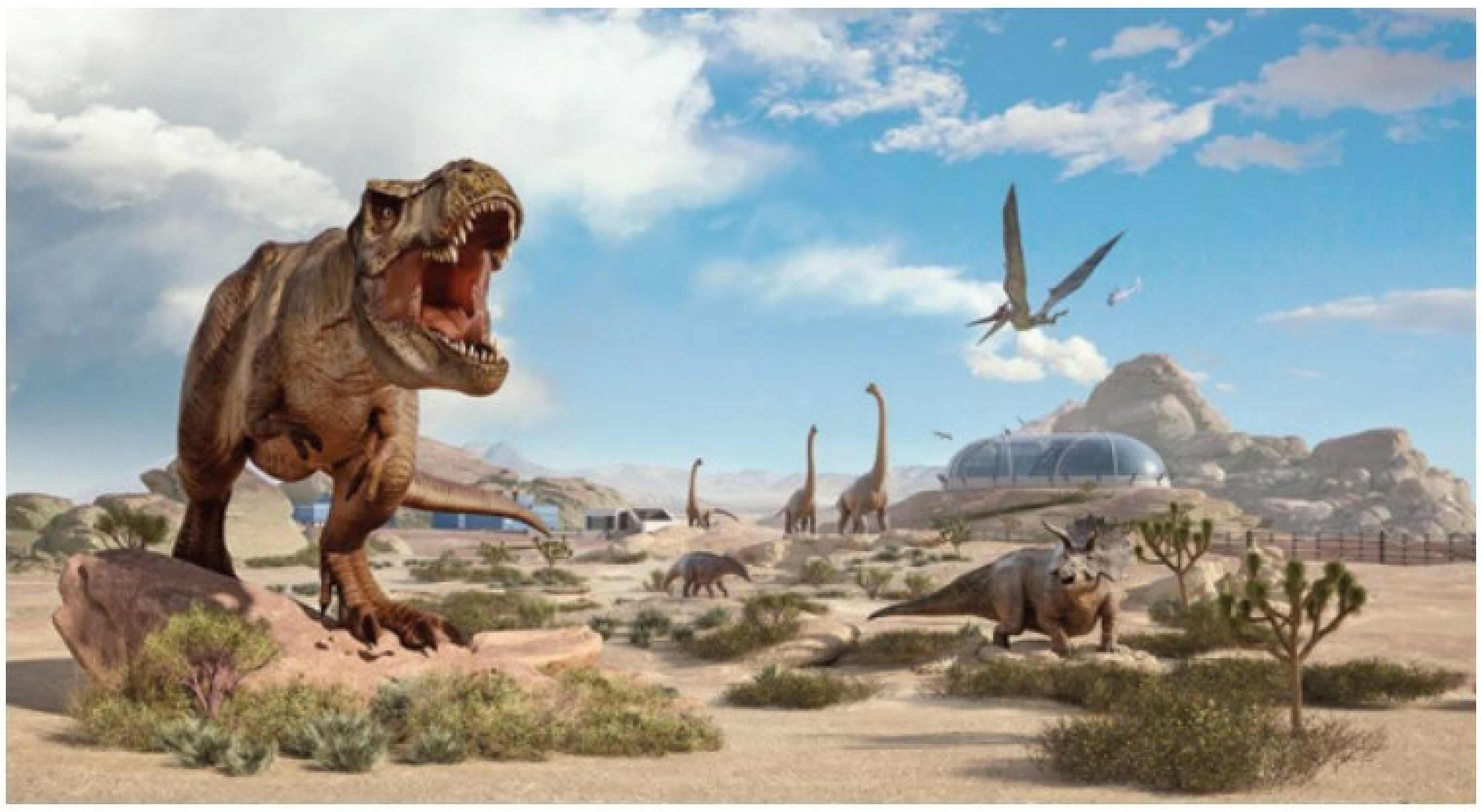


Based on three brief trailers, Somerville's gameplay focuses on escorting your family under the stress of perilous encounters, from sneaking past patrolling enemies and floating, spotlight spires, to sprinting through frenetic firefights as the scenery gets torn to shreds, to swimming through murky waters. You'll even take to the countryside on solo escapades when the rest of your family is in no shape to immediately press forward. The road to safety – wherever that may be – is long and arduous, so you have to rely on your own willpower as well as the support of others to endure the end of the world and vice versa.

Somerville's cinematography and music drip with atmosphere and harsh tension. Once a small solo project led by UK artist Chris Olsen, Somerville has been bolstered by a dedicated team that wants to "help expand the definitions of interactive media." Even acclaimed titles like Limbo and Inside have informed Somerville, because ex-Playdead co-founder Dino Patti is at the helm of Jumpship. Throw in a hand-crafted narrative and gameplay mechanics that employ emotional connections for dramatic effect, and Somerville looks to help fulfill its developers' goals. » **Jason Guisao**

Jurassic World Evolution 2

The bigger the park, the bigger the dinos



Dinosaurs now walk among us in the United States, and you must figure out how we can live with them. Set after the events of the film *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, Frontier Developments invites players to experience a new story that stretches from snowcapped mountains to sprawling desserts, each biome bringing different dinosaur threats, narrative threads, and goals to accomplish.

Frontier says the focus this time around isn't just building theme parks, but that's still what you spend most of your time on. Along with thunder lizards that roam the wilds, you now also have to keep an eye on the waters for giant reptiles like the Mosasaurus we saw leap out of the water to eat a shark in *Jurassic World*. Frontier is also implementing a wider variety of aerial reptiles, and has created fully customizable habitats for them, allowing players to make them huge.

The dinosaurs are smarter this time around. When they get released from their eggs in the Creation Lab, they will now explore their habitat and find a spot that best suits them. This means you can theoretically have multiple areas in a habitat to entice different dinosaur types. Herbivores will feed off of the plant life in these areas and no longer need feeders. The increased intelligence also means predators attack in different ways. Raptors hunt in packs and can collectively take down larger prey.

This will obviously delight some of the park's guests, who want to see carnage. Each guest has different things they are looking for (be it thrill-seeking or relaxation). You have more options with the shops and attractions, thanks to a new system that allows you to design most structures, right down to their color and design.

Frontier is launching Jurassic World Evolution 2 later this year, and says players can look forward to interacting with over 75 different dinosaur types. The campaign no longer has contract missions, and instead creates scenarios and tasks that tie into the story to give it more of a *Jurassic World* movie feel. » **Andrew Reiner**

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Simulation

» Publisher
Frontier Developments

» Developer
Frontier Developments

» Release
TBA

COOL DOWN WITH GAMING
Cris Tales
ALSO ON PS4/PS5/XBOX
Spiritfarer
ALSO ON PS4
PS5
Greak Memories of Azur
ALSO ON SWITCH/XBOX
XBOX ONE
Power Rangers Battle for the Grid Super Edition
ALSO ON SWITCH/PS4
Hotline Miami Collection
Shadowverse Champion's Battle
PS4
Observer System Redux
ALSO ON PS5/XBOX
Zengeon
EVERYONE to MATURE 17+
E-M
ESRB esrb.org
GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS

Babylon's Fall

Not what you'd expect

» **Platform**
PS5 • PS4 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Platinum Games

» **Release**
TBA

While many fans are excited to hear more about Bayonetta 3, Platinum Games continues to deliver updates on one of its other big projects. Even if you count yourself among those itching for any drop on Bayonetta's next adventure, Babylon's Fall is an intriguing project that breaks away from the developer's typical gameplay formula in some big ways.

First announced back in 2018 during Square Enix's E3 press conference, we didn't know too much about Babylon's Fall until it finally reemerged at that same event this year. We now know Babylon's Fall is a co-op action game, playable with up to four players (you can play solo, if you prefer). Most drastically, Babylon's Fall is a live-service title, and Platinum Games has committed itself to a variety of free post-launch content.

This is, notably, a significant shift from the tentpole games Platinum is known for, which tend to be single-player narrative experiences, such as the Bayonetta series, Wonderful 101, and Nier: Automata. Online reaction to Babylon Fall's most recent trailer was mixed, to say the least, with many fans pointing to its gameplay conceits being the opposite of why they play Platinum's games in the first place.

Regardless, the action of Babylon's Fall doesn't appear to stray too far from the gameplay of previous Platinum games. In it, four warriors attempt to overcome the Tower of Babylon, fighting through this titanic structure using equipment called Gideon Coffins.

Because the game utilizes four different characters at once, each with their own weapons and abilities, players are incentivized to use all four together to different results. Looking at the trailer, this all leads to the fluid, fast, deep, and frenetic gameplay Platinum calls its bread and butter.

Like most Platinum games, which have all had their own distinct looks and art styles, Babylon's Fall looks like a watercolor painting in motion. It's smooth, painterly aesthetic juxtaposes nicely against the hack-and-slash gameplay, making for a distinct-looking game – at least based on the trailer; we haven't had a chance to play Babylon's Fall yet.

We still don't know a lot about Babylon's Fall – including details about its post-launch content. Admittedly, Platinum isn't the first developer we think of when considering a live-service cooperative game, and it's hard to say this is what we wanted from the developer compared to, say, the long-in-development-but-seldom-seen Bayonetta 3. But that isn't reason enough to discount it just yet. Platinum does have a decent track record for delivering on its swings for the fences, including but not limited to the aforementioned Wonderful 101, which had players switching between numerous weapons on the fly to take down specific enemies. We're cautiously optimistic to see if Babylon's Fall delivers a similarly interesting diversion to Platinum's core experiences.

» **Blake Hester**

Forza Horizon 5

Firing on all cylinders

The Forza Horizon series began as a fun offshoot of the mainline Motorsport franchise, but the Playground Games-developed titles have become fan favorites thanks to their more arcade-style gameplay and fun over-the-top challenges. Forza Horizon 5 looks to carry on that tradition, but this time, the Horizon Festival is heading south of the border to Mexico.

According to Playground Games, Mexico is the largest, most diverse open world in series history. Touting the power of the Xbox Series X/S consoles, the studio says it can render every tiny detail in this world, right down to individual needles on cacti. Mexico has much more than desert, though, and that's on full display in Forza Horizon 5's interpretation. Players will also drive through idyllic seaside towns, discover scenic waterfalls, and race along rocky volcanoes.

The Forza series has always been a high-water mark in the visuals department, and this fifth entry takes things even further. Using special HDR cameras, Playground Games captured real footage of Mexican skies in stunning 12K resolution. Players can expect photorealistic skies that use dynamic lighting for more immersive visuals, as well as a new volumetric lighting system that accurately captures the humidity of settings like rainforests.

Forza Horizon has become increasingly about playing with others through the years, and you have new ways to do that this time around. A new Expedition mode lets you explore new locations and find players where the Horizon Festival can expand. In the gameplay demo, two players drove along a river to discover the Mayan ruins of Uxmal. Using a new A.I. system that tracks your play and that of others, Forza Horizon 5 suggests activities for you to do and who to do it with. For example, if you start a minigame and a nearby player has a history of enjoying minigames, it might suggest you invite them to join you, which you can do with just the press of a button.

The standard racing events carry over from past entries, but if you're feeling creative, you can dive into the Events Lab to make your own races, game modes, and gameplay experiences. Whether you create a straightforward race or a wacky event where you're knocking down bowling pins and using giant fans to perform mid-air barrel rolls is your decision.

While we haven't had a chance to get our hands on it yet, Forza Horizon 5 has all the elements under the hood to deliver the franchise's best experience to date. This subseries may have started as a spinoff to Turn 10's games, but it has certainly carved out its own identity to become one of the top racing franchises on the market today.
» **Brian Shea**

» **Platform**
Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Racing
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Xbox Game Studios

» **Developer**
Playground Games

» **Release**
November 9

Back 4 Blood

PvP infects the cooperative zombie shooter

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(8-Player Online)

» Publisher
Warner Bros. Interactive

» Developer
Turtle Rock Studios

» Release
October 12

As a spiritual successor to Left 4 Dead, everything we've seen about Back 4 Blood has been focused on its cooperative element. However, during E3 2021, developer Turtle Rock unveiled a new competitive mode called Swarm. This round-based mode pits two teams of players, a band of human survivors, dubbed Cleaners, against a horde of the infected Ridden. The goal for the Cleaners is to survive for as long as possible against their monstrous opponents. If they last for, say, three minutes, that becomes the time to beat. Once the round ends, teams switch sides, and the new group of Cleaners must outlast their predecessors' established survival time to score points. Teams switch back and forth until a winner is declared.

Ridden players can choose between its assortment of specialized types, such as powerful Crushers or volatile Exploders. Between rounds, the Ridden team can spend earned points on stat-raising upgrades such as increased offense and defense. Those same points can also be used to directly manipulate the A.I.-controlled horde of common zombies, such as determining its ratio of enemy types or how fast they move. To further up the ante, a ring consisting of lethal, mutated insects gradually shrinks as rounds progress, forcing the action into tighter spaces similar to a battle royale title.

Swarm sounds like an intense form of PvP that should complement Back 4 Blood's core PvE experience. Turtle Rock is committed to keeping players together, so much so that it revealed that if a party leader purchases post-launch content, such as new maps, their teammates can play that content with them without buying it themselves. Furthermore, paid PvP content can also be earned in-game, and every player accesses the same perk-granting cards before matches regardless of if they bought them or not. All's fair in love and zombie killing. » **Marcus Stewart**

Mario + Rabbids Sparks Of Hope

Rabbid shenanigans spread to Mario's galaxy

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1-Player Strategy
(Multiplayer TBD)

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Milan

» Release
2022

Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle was one of the biggest surprises in the Switch's first year. On top of being an unlikely combination of Mario's iconic cast and Ubisoft's strange and chaotic Rabbids, it was also a successful and fun take on the XCOM series' strategy blueprint. At both Ubisoft's Forward showcase and Nintendo's E3 Direct, we got a good look at what to expect in the sequel, Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope, a galaxy-spanning adventure with even more goofy Rabbid friends.

Nine characters will be playable among a cast of new and old, including Mario, Luigi, Peach, their Rabbid counterparts, and newcomer Rabbid Rosalina, who is the embodiment of being "over it." Joining them are the Sparks, a whimsical amalgamation of Mario Galaxy's star-shaped Lumas and Rabbids. Sparks are powerful new allies for the team whose full effects on battles aren't yet known. A brief gameplay trailer revealed the Sparks can accompany characters on the battlefield and unleash devastating attacks such as ripping a fiery rift in the sky and raining a torrent of fireballs onto enemies. The combat changes include ditching grid-based movement in favor of allowing characters to run around freely in a given space, making movement feel more like a 3D Mario game, as well as a new arsenal of weapons, such as dual-wielded energy pistols and a bow, bringing even more variety to battles.

Pulling the unlikely team into the depths of space is Cursa, a mysterious entity devouring Sparks and corrupting planets in its path. Mario's mission to save the Sparks will bring him and the crew to vibrant sandy beaches, flooded ruins, and a treacherous snowy mountain, with each setting seemingly more open to exploration than those in Kingdom Battle. Where else the journey takes Mario and the Rabbids is currently unknown, but it will almost certainly be a wild and silly trip. » **John Carson**

Madden NFL 22

Not satisfied with punting

Madden NFL 21 was largely panned by the community due to its lack of evolution both on and off the field. Longtime players lamented the absence of meaningful upgrades to the in-game action, while also loudly expressing disappointment in the series' neglect of the popular Franchise mode. By making those two areas the focal points of Madden NFL 22, EA Tiburon hopes to win back some of the dissatisfied fans with this year's entry.

When you take the field this year, EA Tiburon wants to recreate the feeling you get when you're in the stadium during a big game. Not only has the crowd sound been remastered, but new animations inject additional life into the spectators. On top of that, they can now even help determine the outcome of the game.

In Madden NFL 22, crowd noise plays a role in how your team performs. A raucous stadium can make it difficult for the visiting quarterback to hear the play call or communicate in the huddle, but it's not a one-size-fits-all approach. Each stadium has unique characteristics that can help the home team, hinder the opposing team, or affect both teams. For example, the thin air in Denver means that throws and kicks will fly further for both teams, while the visiting team will struggle to catch their breath, taking a hit in short-term stamina. Other examples include the Windy City of Chicago making it tougher for kicks to fly straight, Vikings players getting a red zone boost as the "Skol" chant rings through U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, and the notorious 12th Man of Seattle rattling visiting players and making their pre-snap play art squiggly.

Of course, if you don't give the fans something to cheer about, they can't be a factor in the game. The new Gameday Momentum mechanics offer additional bonuses to players based on how the game is going. Each team can earn these perks, including everything from making your kicker better to making opposing receivers worse at running routes. However, the home team always has one extra to represent the notion of the home-field advantage.

Not all the Madden fun happens on the field. Madden NFL 22 hopes to satisfy those who were upset with the lack of innovation in the Franchise mode in Madden NFL 21. All the post-launch improvements made to last year's title carry into this game, but EA Tiburon isn't stopping there. You can now build, grow, and customize your head coach, player personnel, offensive coordinator, and defensive coordinator using RPG-style skill trees housing more than 60 talents. The Franchise faithful can also expect week-to-week planning to make each team feel like a unique challenge to overcome, practice management to balance progression versus game-time health, and a streamlined user interface. EA Tiburon is also committing to additional improvements post-launch, including huge boosts to prospect scouting, starting in September.

Only time will tell how the community embraces these changes, but the stadium atmosphere and momentum meter do a great job of adding extra innovations to a sport that doesn't change much year over year. With several improvements in place, I'm looking forward to seeing the full realization of EA Tiburon's vision for Franchise mode following launch.
» **Brian Shea**

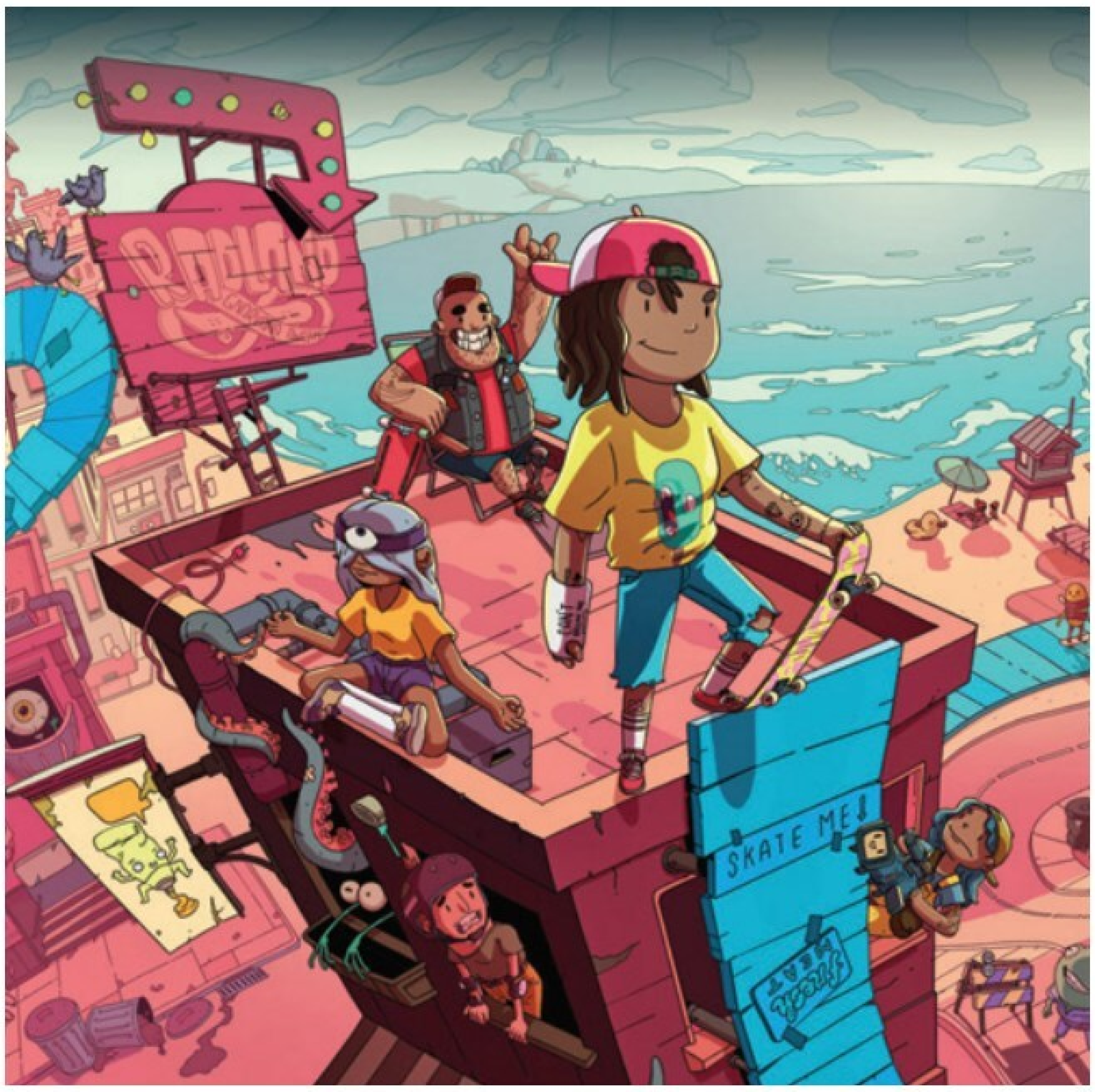
» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Sports
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Tiburon

» **Release**
August 20

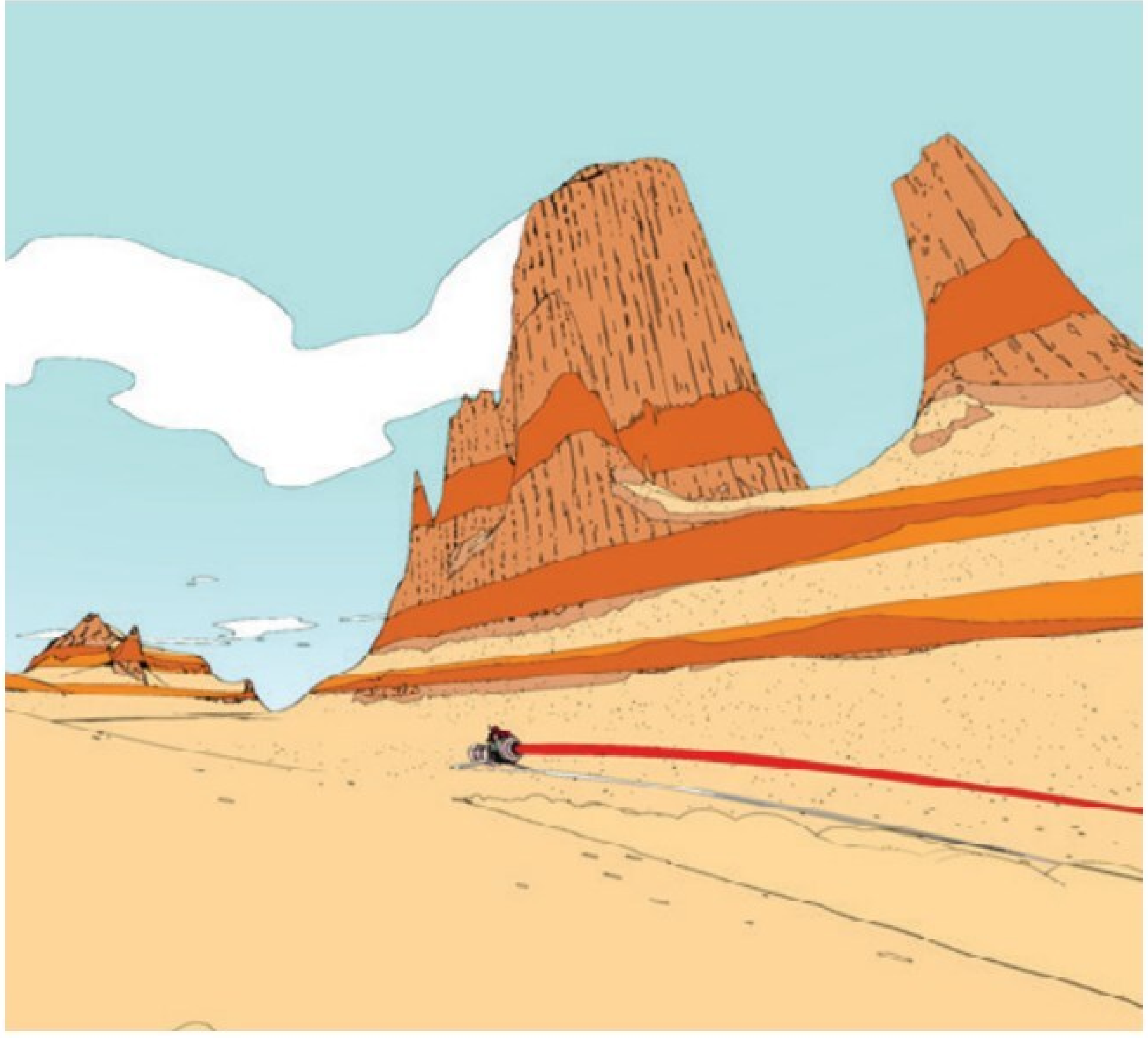


OlliOlli World

We recently went hands-on with the upcoming OlliOlli World, and from our limited time, we were impressed with what we played. More approachable than its predecessors, without sacrificing the series' high skill ceiling, World is easy to pick up, land big combos, and progress through the game's many levels. We're looking forward to playing more this winter when the game hits PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC.

Sable

After playing a recent demo, we have both newfound excitement and concerns about Sable. While the game entices with its Moebius-inspired art style, leading us to want to explore this desert world and meet its inhabitants, an unreliable camera and texture pop-in dampens the experience a bit. One thing we have zero issues with is Sable's ambient soundtrack, composed by Michelle Zauner, of Japanese Breakfast fame. Hopefully, the problematic issues get ironed out by the time the game is released on September 23 for Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and PC.

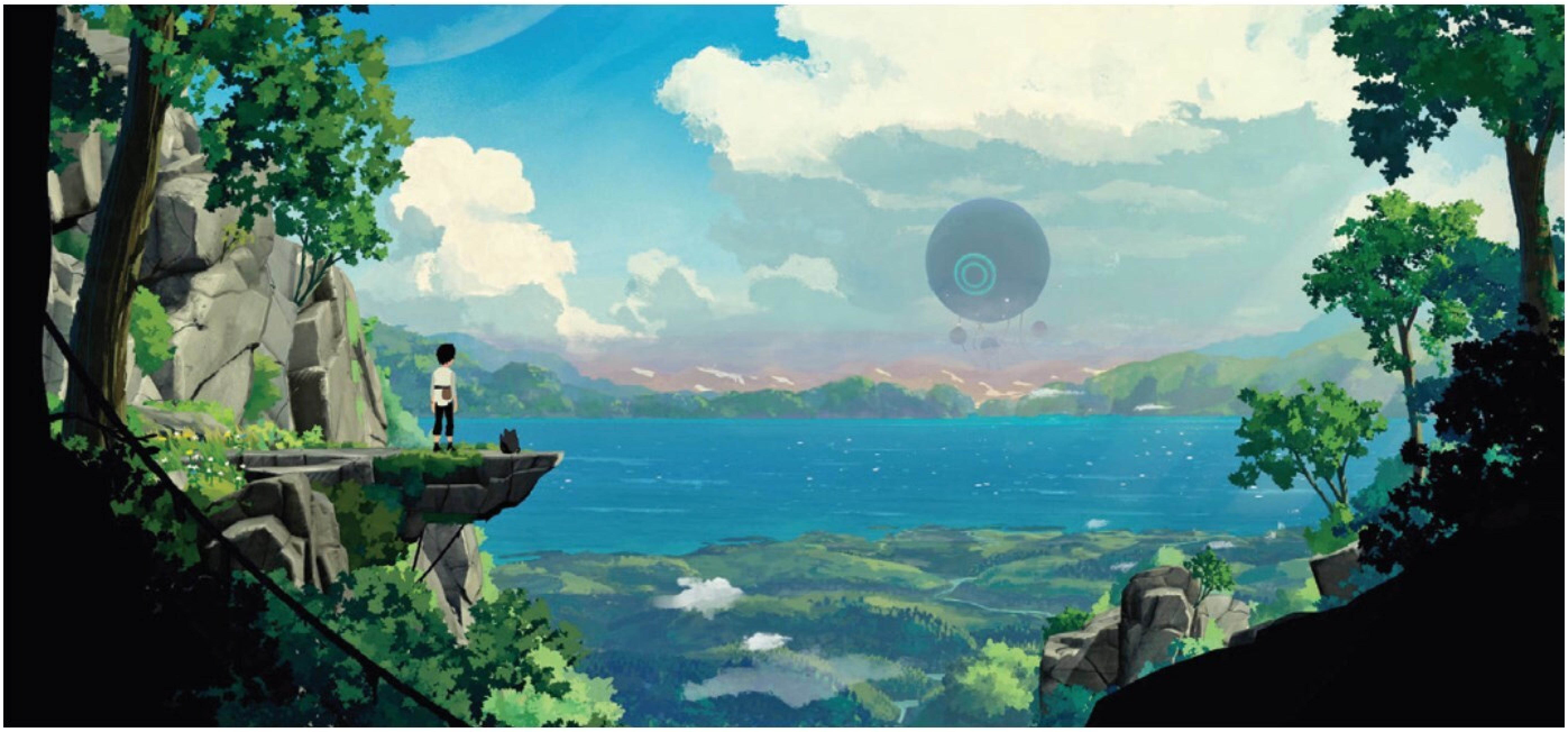


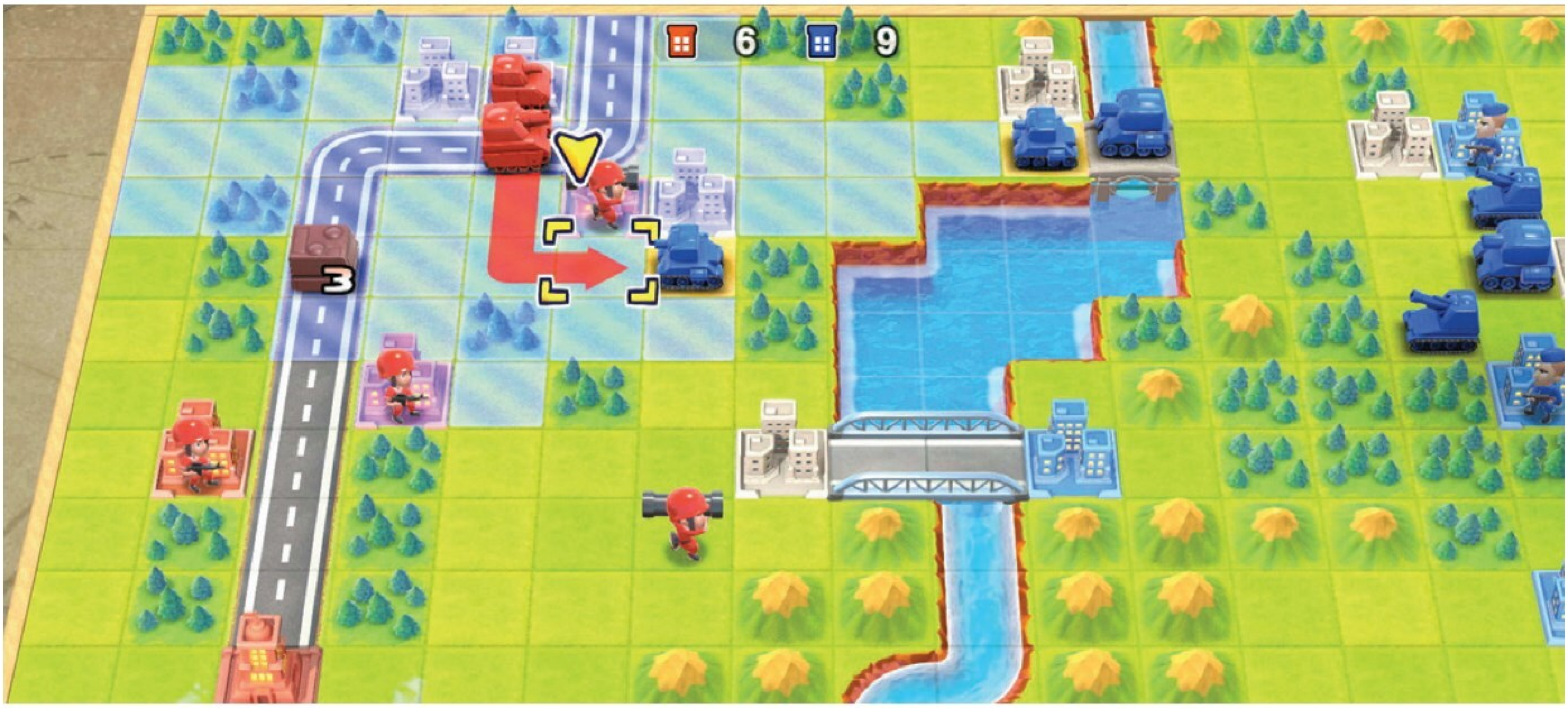
Life Is Strange: True Colors

This new entry may have a fresh protagonist with a new power, but it's still retaining the heavy, emotional themes that drew people to the series. Alex Chen just lost her brother, and the only way to solve the mystery behind his death is with her double-edged power: empathy. Alex can absorb and manipulate the emotions around her, impacting the relationships she builds and decisions she makes, even seeing reflections of people's psyches. You'll decide how far to explore these complicated emotions when the game launches in full on September 10 for PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Stadia, and PC.

Planet Of Lana

Planet of Lana is a cinematic puzzle adventure game that challenges a young girl with her adorable little friend to embark on a new mission of heroics. She and her floofy companion must venture across a planet that used to be untainted by the corruption of mankind. This world once offered a colorful whirlwind of beauty and inspirational exploration. However, disharmony has been slowly unraveling the balance between mankind and nature, and a new danger awaits on the horizon in the form of a faceless army that is anything but friendly. Luckily, that doesn't spell out the disaster one might think. Players can explore the world of Lana sometime in 2022, though no platforms have been announced at this time.





Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp

Heralded as one of the greatest turn-based tactical games of all time, Advance Wars is finally making a return – not as a new game, but as a Switch remaster that collects the first two Game Boy Advance titles. Both of these classics are being reimagined and rebuilt from the ground up, bringing the strategic excitement back with new polygonal graphics as well as hand-drawn animations. In addition to the sizable campaigns in both games, you can play with up to four players, competing against one another in Versus mode. Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp is slated to release on December 3. If you like the sound of these games, be sure to check out Wargroove, a spiritual successor that is every bit as good as the original Advance Wars series.

Vampire: The Masquerade Bloodhunt

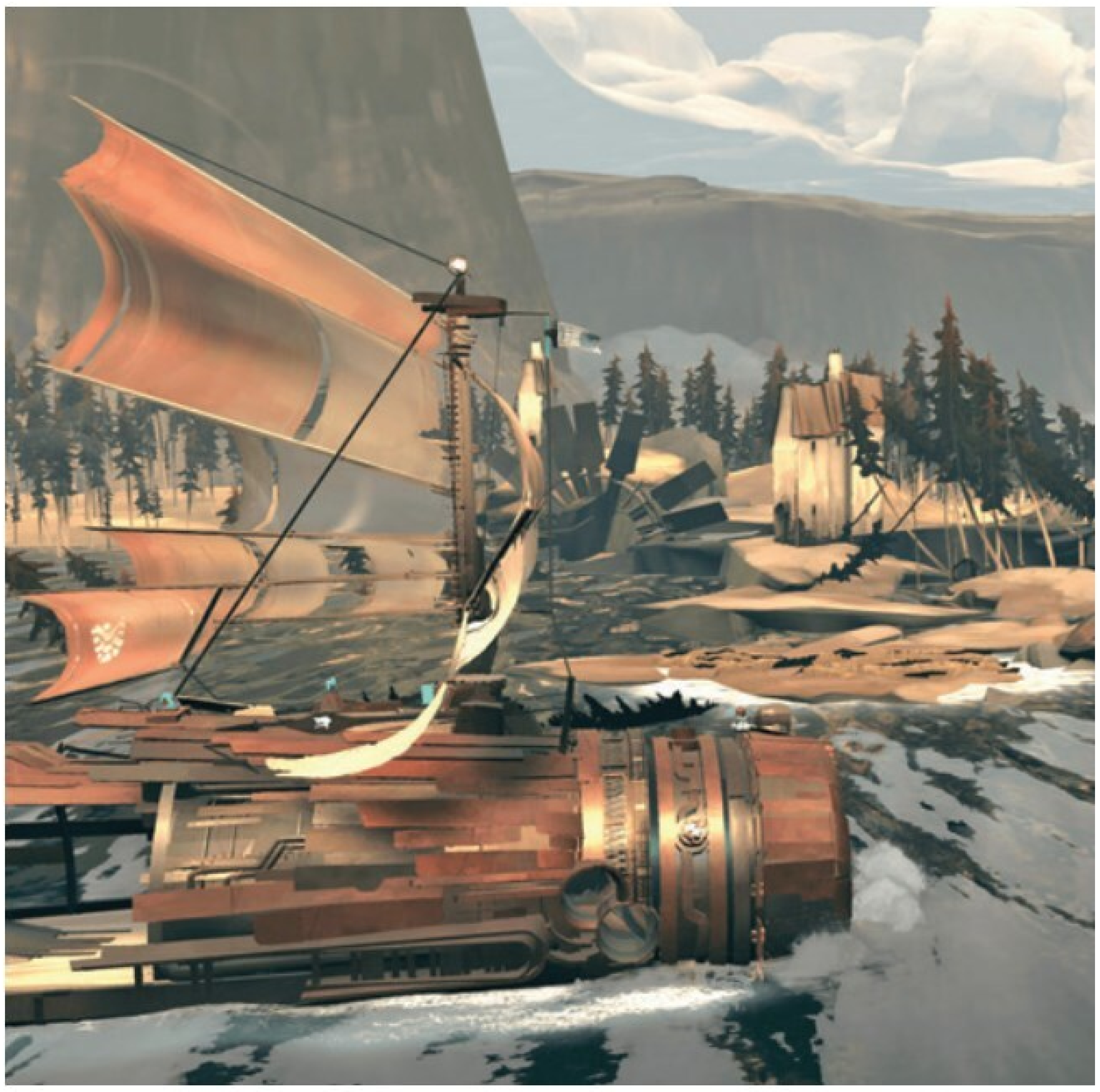
It turns out the world of Vampire: The Masquerade and battle royale pair together incredibly well. What are vampires, if not incredibly cunning creatures with the means, and desire, to kill? What is battle royale, if not the same? Unlike other shooter genres, battle royale consists of a blend of tactical waiting and rushing for the gold. Hurry up and wait, if you will. Implement that strategy and place it up against a macabre backdrop of vampiric glory, and you've got yourself an innovative game that takes a beloved universe and puts a unique, social spin on it. The hunt begins when Bloodhunt arrives on PC sometime later this year.

Avatar: Frontiers Of Pandora

Massive Entertainment has previously explored the dystopian cityscapes of The Division, but the team is turning its attention to more fanciful horizons with this first-person action game. Players control a Na'vi who visits an as-yet unseen section of Pandora to explore, fight the forces of the RDA, and even fly high through the skies. Massive is promising a dramatically expanded and improved version of the Snowdrop engine driving the game. Early glimpses are visually breathtaking, even if we have to wait until 2022 to play on PS5, Xbox Series X/S, Stadia, Luna, or PC.

Atomic Heart

Atomic Heart had an impressive showing during Microsoft's E3 press conference, even if it left us with more questions about what the game actually is. Developer Mundfish details the game's plot setup, in which a global systems failure in a Soviet facility has caused machines to rebel against humans. The player's task is to thwart this worldwide threat and stop sensitive information from leaking into the broader world. There's no release date yet, but we're interested in finally learning more about this open-world RPG when it comes to PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, and PC.

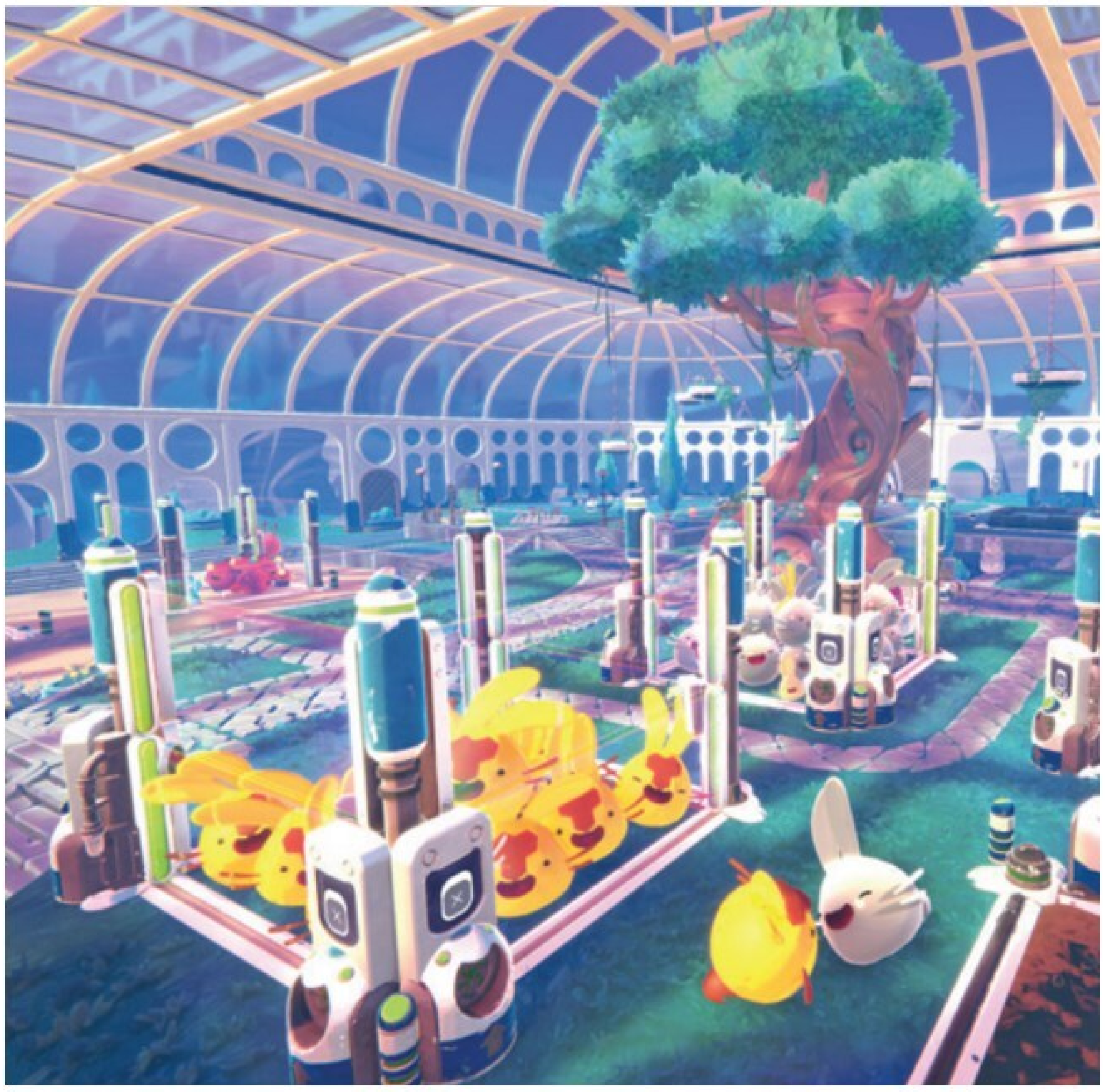


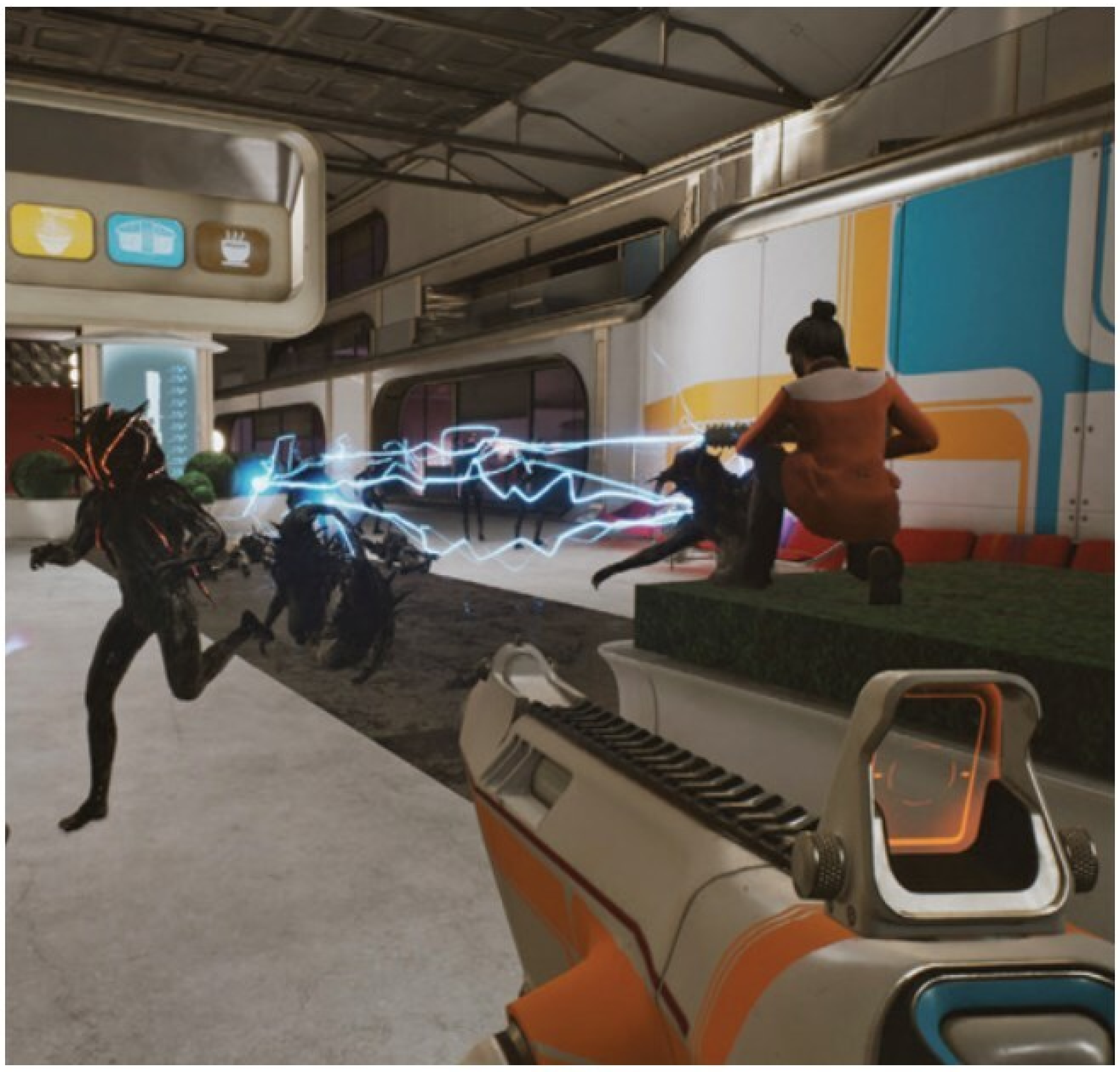
Far: Changing Tides

This sequel to Far: Lone Sails takes its post-apocalyptic road trip and pours an entire ocean over it. As Toe, you explore flooded ruins aboard a makeshift vessel that you upgrade to withstand storms and traverse challenging obstacles. Toe can also dive underneath the depths in search of fuel, salvage, and relics. Far: Changing Tides comes to current and last-gen PlayStation and Xbox consoles alongside Switch and PC later this year.

Slime Rancher 2

Monomi Park's adorable creature-wrangler, Slime Rancher, is getting a sequel next year. Slime Rancher 2 features the return of Beatrix LeBeau, who sets off to Rainbow Island, a land with an abundance of adventure, and more importantly, new slimes to round up. Expect plenty of farming in the island's conservatory and new gadgets to use alongside Beatrix's trusty vacpack. Slime Rancher 2 is coming to Xbox Series X/S and PC sometime in 2022.



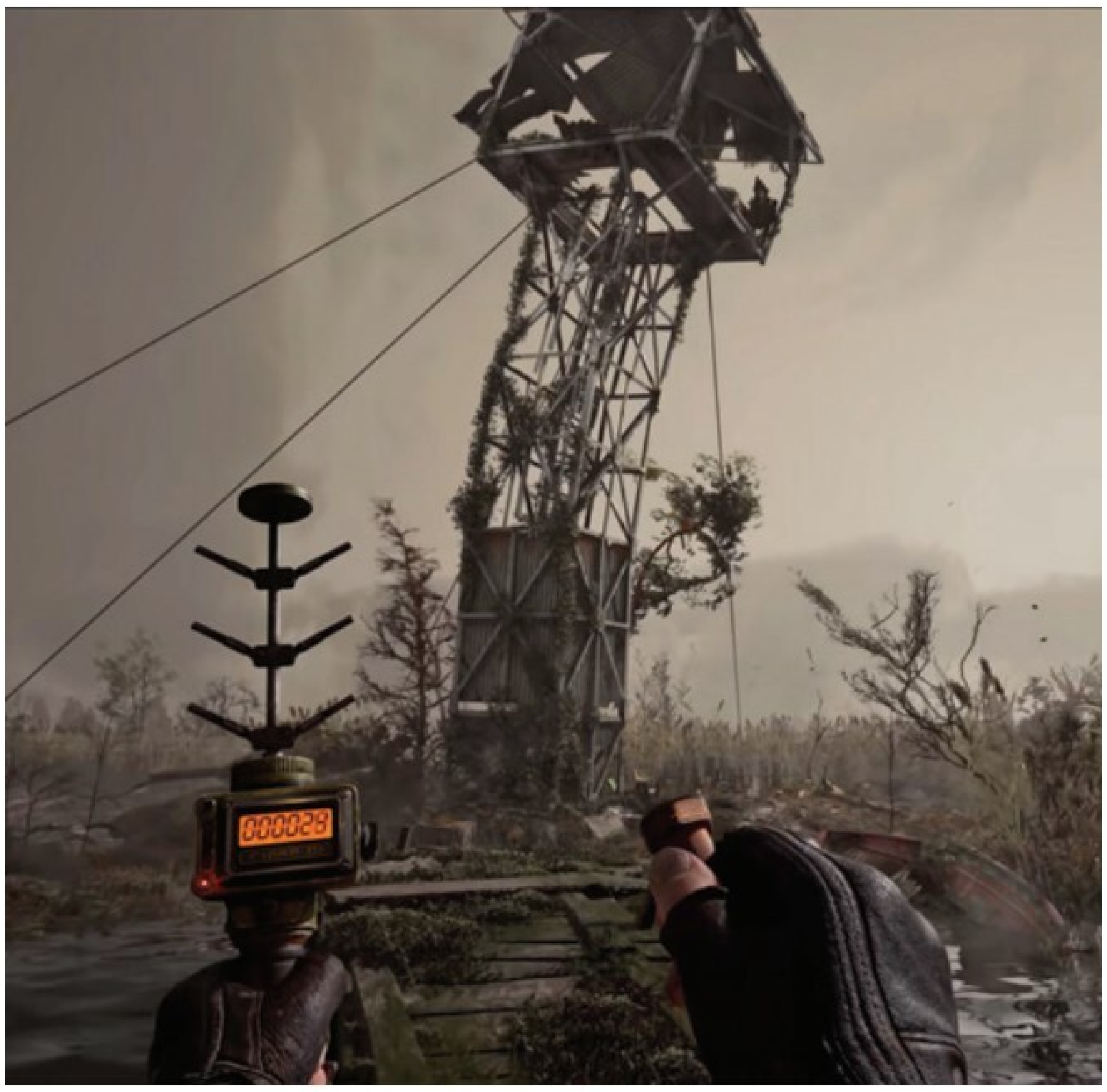


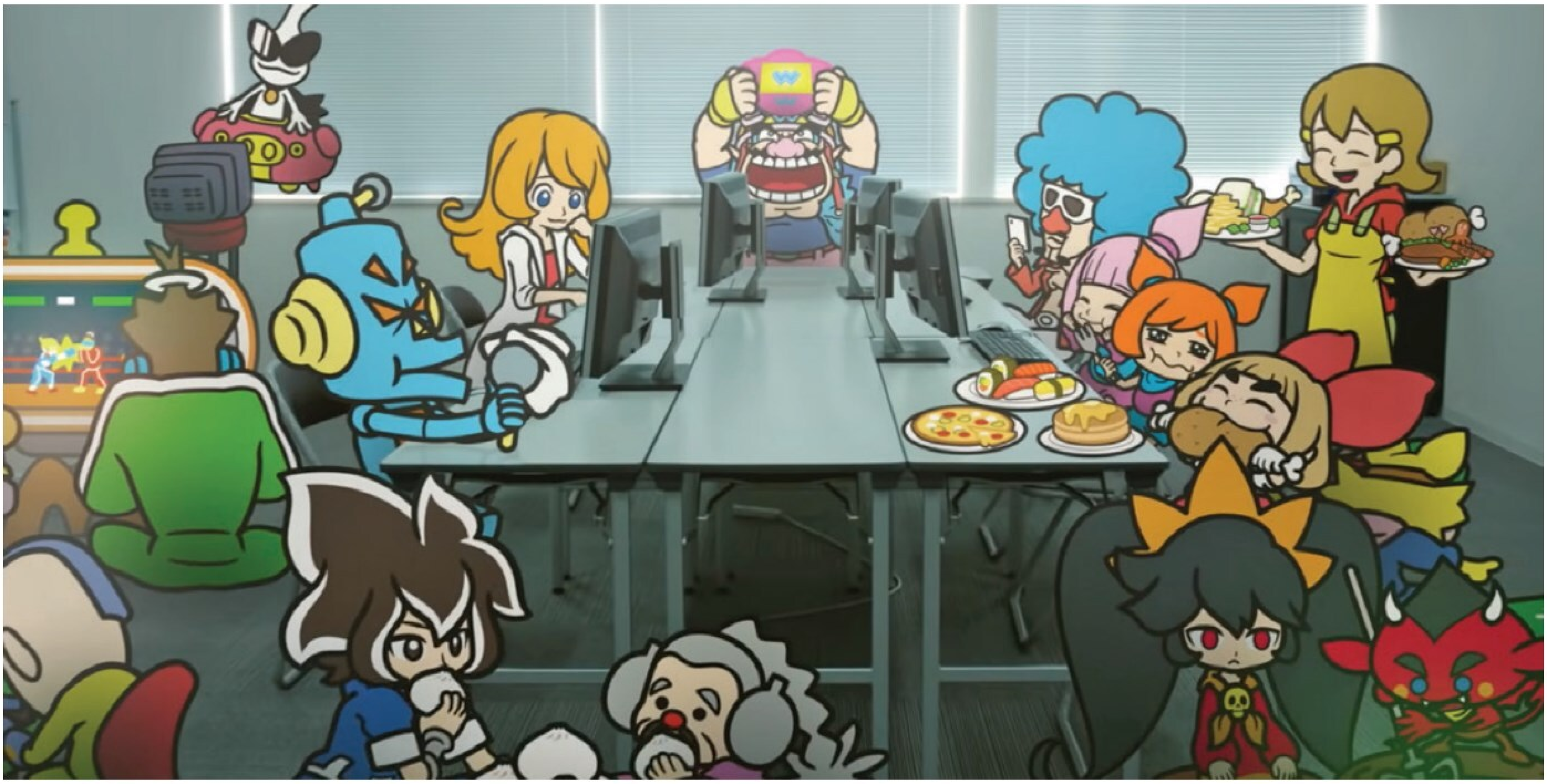
The Anacrusis

The Anacrusis is a four-player FPS that takes place aboard a derelict cruiser. You explore each region of the ship – from disco rooms to lush gardens – while being hunted by a growing army of tentacled aliens. An "A.I. Driver" works as an automated dungeon master that decides enemy, boss, and item placement so that each foray is different. The Anacrusis has a 2021 release window. If you're looking for a Left 4 Dead-inspired experience outside of Back 4 Blood, this might be the game for you.

Stalker 2: Heart Of Chernobyl

GSC Game World's gritty RPG/shooter hybrid sequel re-emerged as an Xbox console exclusive during the Microsoft E3 showcase. Slated for a release on Xbox Series X/S and PC on April 28, 2022, Stalker 2: Heart of Chernobyl returns to the Exclusion Zone, an irradiated area surrounding the tragic town of Chernobyl where mutated beasts and other horrors roam. While the setting is grim, what was shown in the E3 trailer was mysterious and beautiful.



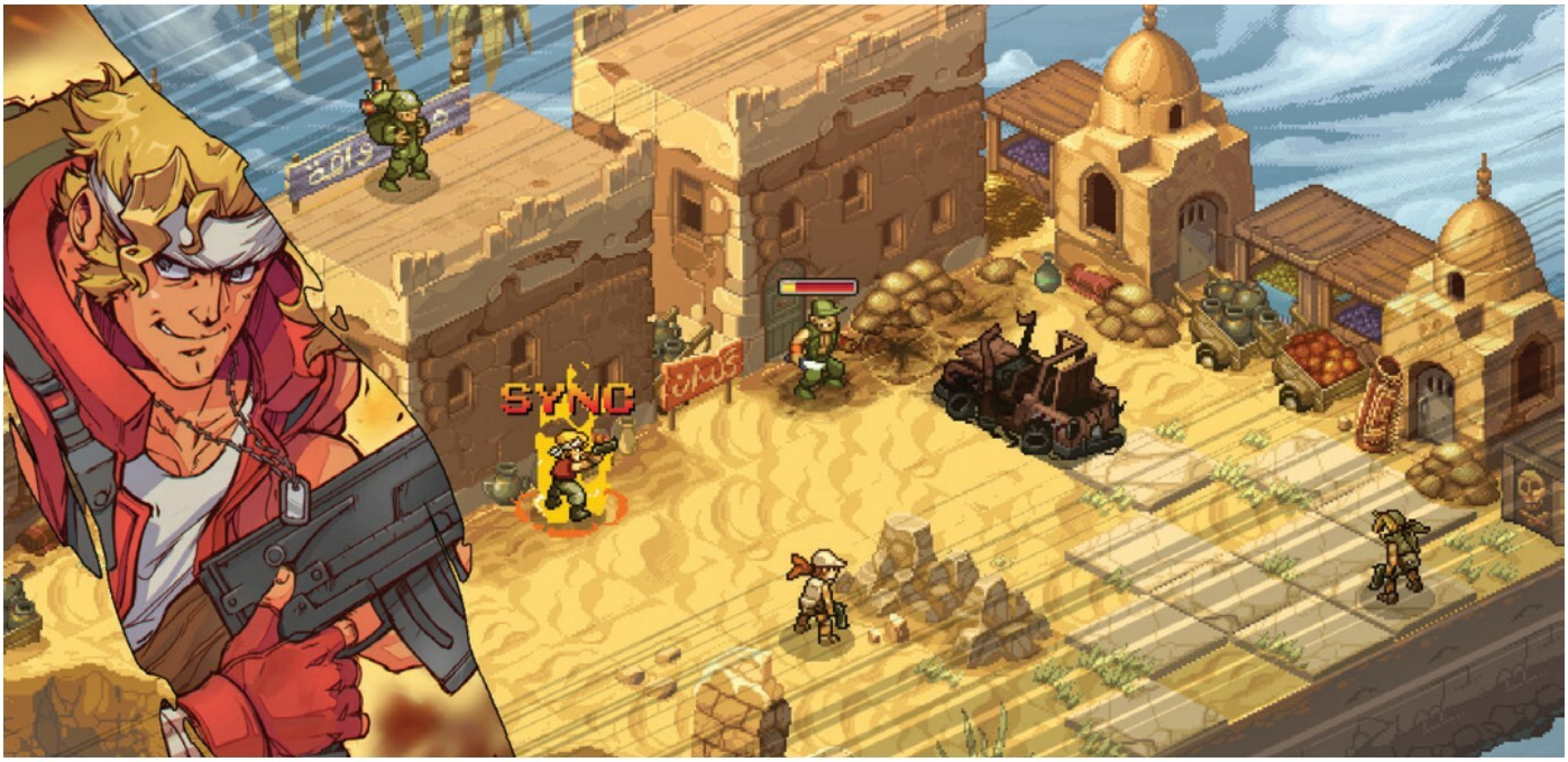


WarioWare: Get It Together!

Not to be outdone by the other big surprises in Nintendo's recent E3 Direct, Wario and his band of "chumps" (his word, not ours) are making a return in WarioWare: Get It Together!. Not only are their brand of shenanigans and microgames back, but the cast is also playable to complete quick-hitting tasks solo or in cooperative challenges. WarioWare: Get It Together is right around the corner, launching on September 10 for Nintendo Switch.

Metal Slug Tactics

Metal Slug games have traditionally been run-and-gun side-scrollers, but over the years, we've seen third-person shooter and tower defense spinoffs. Soon, the series will also enter the strategy space. Metal Slug Tactics blends the series' splashy visuals and cartoonish military vibe with grid-based tactical RPG mechanics. Players can wield classic Metal Slug weaponry and outwit their enemies in battles that take place across a series of procedurally generated environments. Developer Leikir Studio has also promised a few roguelike elements to ensure that no two runs are ever the same.



A Plague Tale: Requiem

Asobo Studio's A Plague Tale: Innocence was one of the most compelling and emotionally moving games we played in 2019. That story followed a young girl named Amicia de Rune as she battled Inquisition soldiers and endless waves of flesh-hungry rats all while caring for her helpless younger brother. Requiem continues their perilous story and will hopefully serve up some refined stealth action when it comes to PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, Switch (via cloud play), and PC in 2022. ◆

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 338

77 Scarlet Nexus

If you are looking for awesome action and superb style, Scarlet Nexus is the place to be. This action-RPG features fluid, captivating combat, and a futuristic "brainpunk" aesthetic that's great fun. Use psionic powers to blow your enemies away and look incredible while doing it.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	That person who paid $1.5 million for Super Mario 64. We would have sold you our "slightly played" copy for half of that cost.

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Scarlet Nexus

Anime ascendant

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 338

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Bandai Namco **Release** June 25 **Rating** T

8.75

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Tap into incredible mind powers as you battle to save the world and unravel mysteries of the past

» Graphics
Scarlet Nexus excels at selling an anime fantasy world with powerful, stylish displays and impactful animations

» Sound
The soundtrack syncs up with the fluid action for scintillating synergy, but doesn't always hit the mark

» Playability
The action starts simple and amusing, but grows more complex and satisfying by the game's end, with massive combo chains, call-ins, and special abilities

» Entertainment
With incredibly satisfying combat, weird and wonderful creatures, and an awesome aesthetic, Scarlet Nexus is well worth your time

» Replay Value
Moderate

Scarlet Nexus transports players into a "brainpunk" anime world where psionic powers and bizarre otherworldly creatures threaten humanity. In this somewhat modern era, massive advances in mind technology have led to the use of incredible psychic abilities. Of course, not everything is as it seems, and a mystery unravels over the course of the journey. Scarlet Nexus excels at selling its stylish and unique world, crafting combat that's a joy to play and watch, pitting players against weird, wonderful bosses. However, some elements – like character dialogue, relationship building, and level design – weigh down an otherwise excellent experience.

Scarlet Nexus seems tailor-made for anime lovers with sharp visuals, zany plotlines, and fantastic action sequences. Even if you don't love anime, the combat and animations are eye-catching. Initially, you're just whacking away monsters and gaining experience – tasks familiar to anyone who has ever played an RPG. But not too far into the game, you get the chance to manipulate the environment via psychokinesis. This can be as simple as throwing around barrels and boxes, but it is way more fun lifting busses, chandeliers, ice sculptures, and more. I had a blast ripping the world apart to shred enemies and pulling up the scenery then riding it around the environment. The kinetic elements create an incredibly smooth flow from fight to fight.

Over the course of the game, combat becomes much more complex and interesting as you gain the ability to tap into your friends' special abilities and weave them into your assaults. For example, does an opponent goes invulnerable whenever you get close? Go invisible or teleport to them. Having trouble dealing with speedy opponents? Stop time altogether. Later in the game, you can even use multiple abilities simultaneously to really make the screen explode with massive combo chains. I loved experimenting and combining skills to tear foes apart.

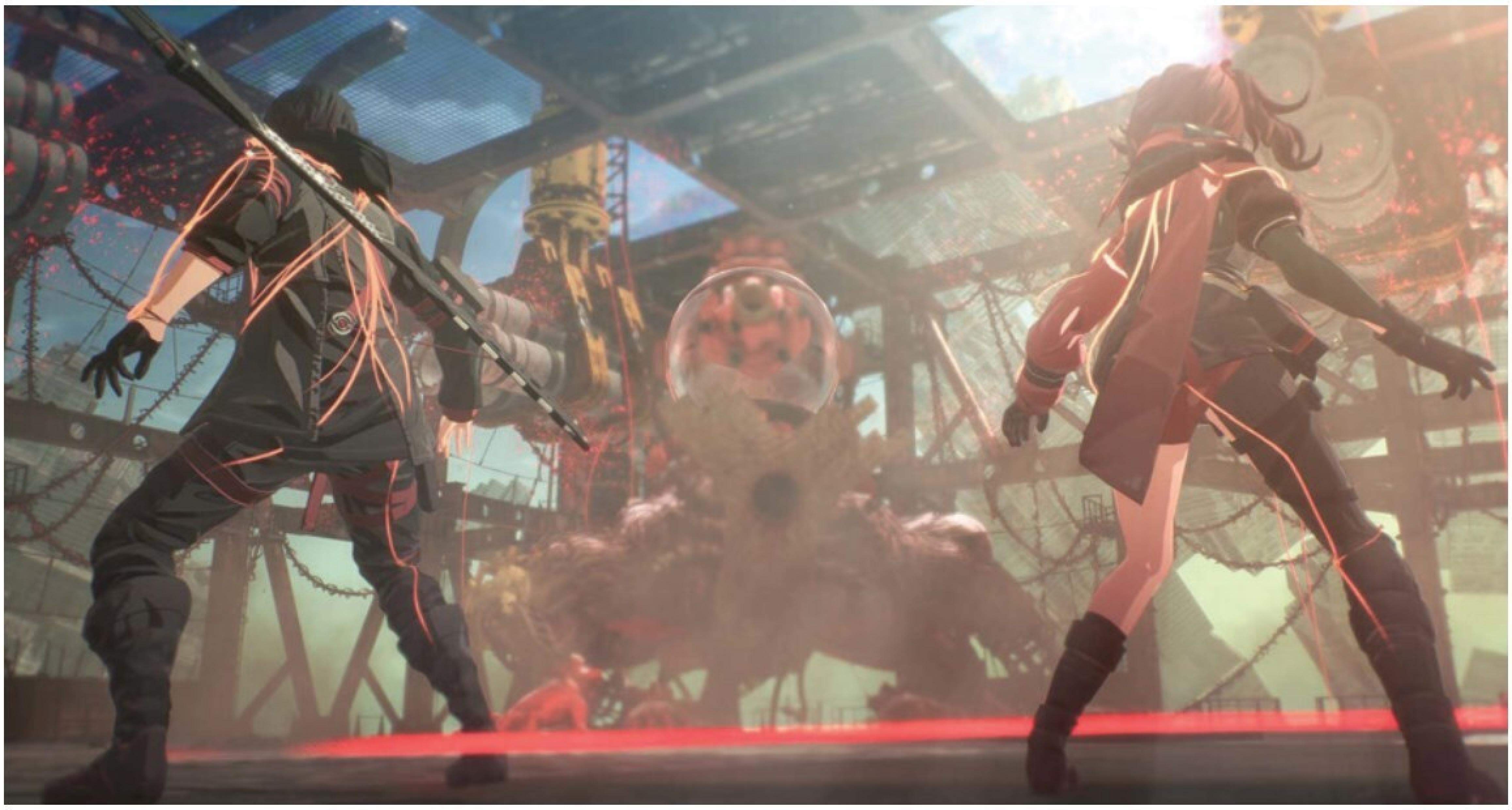
As I developed relationships with the character roster, I gained the opportunity to call them in directly to participate in massive combo attacks. Skirmishes often cap off with an epic anime animation as you slaughter the villainous creatures with stylish finishing attacks. As if this wasn't enough, you gain new brain-related skills as you progress, such as an activatable brain field that must be charged up in battle that conveys tremendous psionic powers for a brief time. To add a bit of risk-reward, you must manually turn the brain field off before the timer runs out – or you'll die. Combat is the best part of Scarlet Nexus, and it grew more enjoyable and interesting as I advanced in the story.

The world of Scarlet Nexus is awesome. The monsters you battle, known as Others, are aberrant amalgamations of organic material and random, familiar objects. These creepy creations are as fascinating as they are unusual. Frenetic boss battles where you engage in lightning-fast brain warfare with other psionic adepts play out like badass anime sequences, and made me feel like I was actually playing an anime.

The action is incredibly engaging. The story and characters, not so much. Unfortunately, the story introduces a ludicrous number of characters early on and they don't grow much throughout the campaign. The plot is an absurd out-of-this world tale that only makes sense in a universe this strange, but the little vignettes you unlock by improving your relationships with each individual character feel sterile and stagnant.

Scarlet Nexus also becomes repetitive with reused areas and monsters to an extreme degree, especially in the later areas. The level layouts in Scarlet Nexus feel overly functional, with little distance from checkpoint to checkpoint – just a straight line of checkpoints and arenas without any dressing. Luckily, enough lush, animated trappings are around to take you out of that cold design as you cruise from stage to stage.

Whatever brainpunk's take on over-the-top psychic reality is, I'm into it now. Bandai Namco has crafted something truly strange and quite satisfying with Scarlet Nexus, and I hope we get a slightly more refined sequel.
» Daniel Tack



Mario Golf: Super Rush

Teed for speed

8.25

Switch

» Concept
Take the traditionally slow-paced game of golf and inject a foot race into the middle of the competition

» Graphics
The Mario gang looks snazzy in their finest golf apparel, and the courses are brought to life with vibrant visuals

» Sound
Super Rush's soundtrack has a couple of bangers, but I quickly grew tired of much of the music. My Mii character's voice alone made me want to mute the game

» Playability
The core game of golf is well represented in an approachable manner, and having your fundamentals down will serve you well as you try to get your putt off before an opponent drops a Bob-omb on you in Battle Golf

» Entertainment
Whether you want to play 18 holes of traditional golf or blast your opponents into oblivion, Mario Golf: Super Rush is a fun package for both fans and non-fans of the real-life sport

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Camelot Software **Release** June 25 **Rating** E

Mario Kart and Mario Tennis players understand that when Nintendo infiltrates a sport, they take the spirit of the game and turn it on its head with power-ups, unique character abilities, and zany courses. The game of golf is a patient affair, but when Mario and company step up to the tee in Mario Golf: Super Rush, it's hardly slow-paced, as the unique take on the sport injects foot races, battle modes, and special abilities to often chaotic results.

The core golf mechanics shine in Mario Golf: Super Rush. Lining up your shot, using the in-game measuring tools to judge the distance you need, and entering your backswing is an easy mechanic to understand. Selecting the power on your shot is done with a single, timed button press, with each stroke giving you the opportunity to add subtle effects like spin and curve through intuitive commands. On multiple occasions, I found a tree standing in my path to the green, but through shaping my shot, I could choose to either wrap the ball around the tree or float it above and land on the other side. Nailing a perfect shot like that is a regular occurrence thanks to streamlined controls, but it doesn't make it any less satisfying to see your ball curve around a tree and land perfectly where you were aiming.

Obviously, the goal is to get your ball on the fairway or green, but if you find yourself in other spots, whether that's the rough, a sand trap, or something worse, you must take those elements, as well as any slope of the terrain, into account. Where your ball lies affects the distance, trajectory, and even how the ball curves off your club. Once on the green, putting is as simple as lining up your shot, again accounting for the slope of the surface, and timing the meter to apply the correct amount of power. The tools at your disposal make the core golf mechanics continuously enjoyable from moment to moment and lay a terrific foundation for the more over-the-top deviations from the traditional golf formula. While Mario Golf: Super Rush provides a strong take on the traditional sport, destination modes like Speed Golf and Battle Golf (both of which can be played online) provide unique and entertaining twists to the tried-and-true formula.

In Speed Golf, you tee off alongside up to three opponents, then take part in a foot race to where your ball lands before taking another swing. The goal remains getting the ball in the hole, but rather than taking your time to line up each shot, you have the clock to worry about; each stroke adds 30 seconds to your course time, and the player with the lowest time takes the podium. As you sprint to your ball, you need to consider the best route, your stamina meter, and on-course obstacles. However, the most fun part of the mode is when special shots and dashes start messing with the characters. While golfers are typically among the most respectful and chivalrous athletes, that all goes out the window in these modes; blasting somebody with your special dash is simply too much fun to ignore. However, Speed Golf's biggest weakness is that this element isn't taken far enough; too often the running parts of this mode feel uneventful, and the action frequently feels like filler between your strokes. Thankfully, for those who like the more chaotic elements, there's Battle Golf.

Battle Golf drops you into an arena with other players in a nonlinear, free-for-all mode with the mission to sink three holes first. The stadium is full of environmental traps and weapons for players to use on each other; blasting a nearby rival with a Bob-omb as they try to line up their putt is beyond satisfying. Since holes disappear after the first player sinks it, you need to be strategic about which flagsticks you target, as well as the path you take to each one. On top of dangers like Chain-Chomps, Thwomps, and Bob-ombs, players can also use special shots to electrocute other players, turn their balls into imprecise Yoshi eggs, and even haunt them with a Boo to cause their shots to veer off course. For every half-measure that Speed Golf takes, Battle Golf goes all in, delivering my favorite mode in the Mario Golf: Super Rush package.

Unfortunately, another main attraction to Mario Golf: Super Rush doesn't live up to its potential. Serving as both a tutorial and a linear story mode with light RPG elements, the single-player Golf Adventure is an adequate place to start your Mario Golf journey if you're wanting to learn the basics, but the shine wears off fast. The mode is skippable thanks to its tendency to spotlight different unexciting variants of Speed Golf, repetitive boss fights, and downright frustrating modes. One section drops you into a big open course with several nonlinear holes like Battle Golf, only it's a solo version with stroke limits and tornados you use to reach higher areas; if you don't hit these tornados at just the right angle or miss the tornado and instead land at the foot of it, your attempt is basically done for as you waste precious strokes returning to the correct angle. Add in a completely nonessential story as the backdrop, and you're better off sticking with the standalone modes.

Despite the underwhelming nature of the story mode, Mario Golf: Super Rush delivers plenty of golfing greatness. With a strong foundation and multiple fun avenues of play, Mario Golf: Super Rush carries on the long-standing tradition of Nintendo sports games by being a good time regardless of your fandom of the actual sport. » **Brian Shea**

Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings Of Ruin

My Monstie and me

Style 1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Capcom **Release** July 9 **Rating** E10+

Mainline Monster Hunter games have recently received many quality-of-life changes, but this sequel to Monster Hunter Stories might be the perfect on-ramp for those who want to start hunting. In Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin, Monstie riders create bonds with monsters, trusting them enough to fight alongside each other in battle. The Stories series focuses on a monster-collecting adventure, and converts the epic monster confrontations into turn-based RPG battles while keeping hints of the strategy and planning Monster Hunter is known for.

Combat features rock-paper-scissors rules where learning a monster's attack types and which weapons are effective is the key to surviving. Veterans of Monster Hunter will be familiar with this system, but Stories does a great job explaining the finer points to newcomers. Your character is the only fully controllable party member while Monsties attack and use skills on their own in battle unless you tell them to use a specific ability. Whether switching weapons mid-battle or doing a quick-time event, I always feel like I have something to do. The strongest attacks available are called Kinship Skills – flashy super moves you and your Monstie unleash that add a lot of fun to battles and highlight each Monstie's personality.

Monsters are the star of this show, and Wings of Ruin brings tons of series favorites to fight and collect. Of course, the series' mainstays like Rathalos and Diablos are here, but so are some offbeat monsters such as the bright-colored lemur Kecha Wacha and my favorite toothy pale creeper, Khezu. I love how much of Stories feels like an alternate take on a traditional Monster Hunter, but keeps your character's main form of progression tied to their gear. While experience and character levels factor into your success in combat, gear crafted from monster parts is the biggest difference-maker. I enjoy pinpointing which monsters to target to create the next piece of armor to help me beat bigger foes, though having the right Monsties at your side is also essential.

Monsties aren't caught, but instead hatched from eggs nabbed out of nests in monster dens. Besting monsters in battle can cause them to retreat to a den, almost guaranteeing an egg discovery of that species. A den's rewards are great, but the areas feel empty and repetitive, making the process of gathering eggs tedious. Each Monstie sports a set of genes bestowing different stat boosts or special moves; these can be transferred from one creature to another. Doing so can yield unique, and even funny results, like an ice-slinging Anjanath or a Tigrex that farts toxic gas. Editing genes helped immensely in rounding out the attacks and abilities of my Monstie party. Gene manipulation can significantly extend your time with Wings of Ruin, especially in competitive multiplayer battles.

Multiplayer has some fun ideas, but it's limited in scope. Head-to-head battles allow you to put your genetically enhanced Monsties to the test by facing other riders in one-on-one or four-player team battles, while cooperative quests let you take on monsters and explore den-like dungeons with friends. Players can take on monsters side-by-side, emulating the battle buddies who travel with you in the main scenario. Co-op missions lack objective variety at this point, but I do like the option to spend some time collecting eggs and taking down monsters with a friend.

As for the story, your character is a descendant of an influential rider named Red, traveling alongside Navirou, a talkative feyline, and Ena, a Wyvernian with connections to Red. Their goal is to uncover the secrets of a special Monstie you inherit named Razewing Ratha, who is said to have the power to bring ruin to the world just by flapping its wings. This narrative starts with a bang but doesn't pick up again until hours later. Moral lessons regarding Ratha's potential for destruction fell flat for me. Stories 2 is at its best when the action surrounds Ratha, and the mysterious glowing pits of energy spread across the land are firing on all cylinders.

Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin's story may not light the world on fire, but it's a fun experience that can acclimate new players to the outstanding elements of the Monster Hunter series. Combat encounters are full of rich strategy, and Monstie collecting and gear customization kept me coming back even after the credits rolled.

» John Carson

8.5

Switch, PC

» Concept
An approachable turn-based Monster Hunter where you befriend monsters and fight by their side

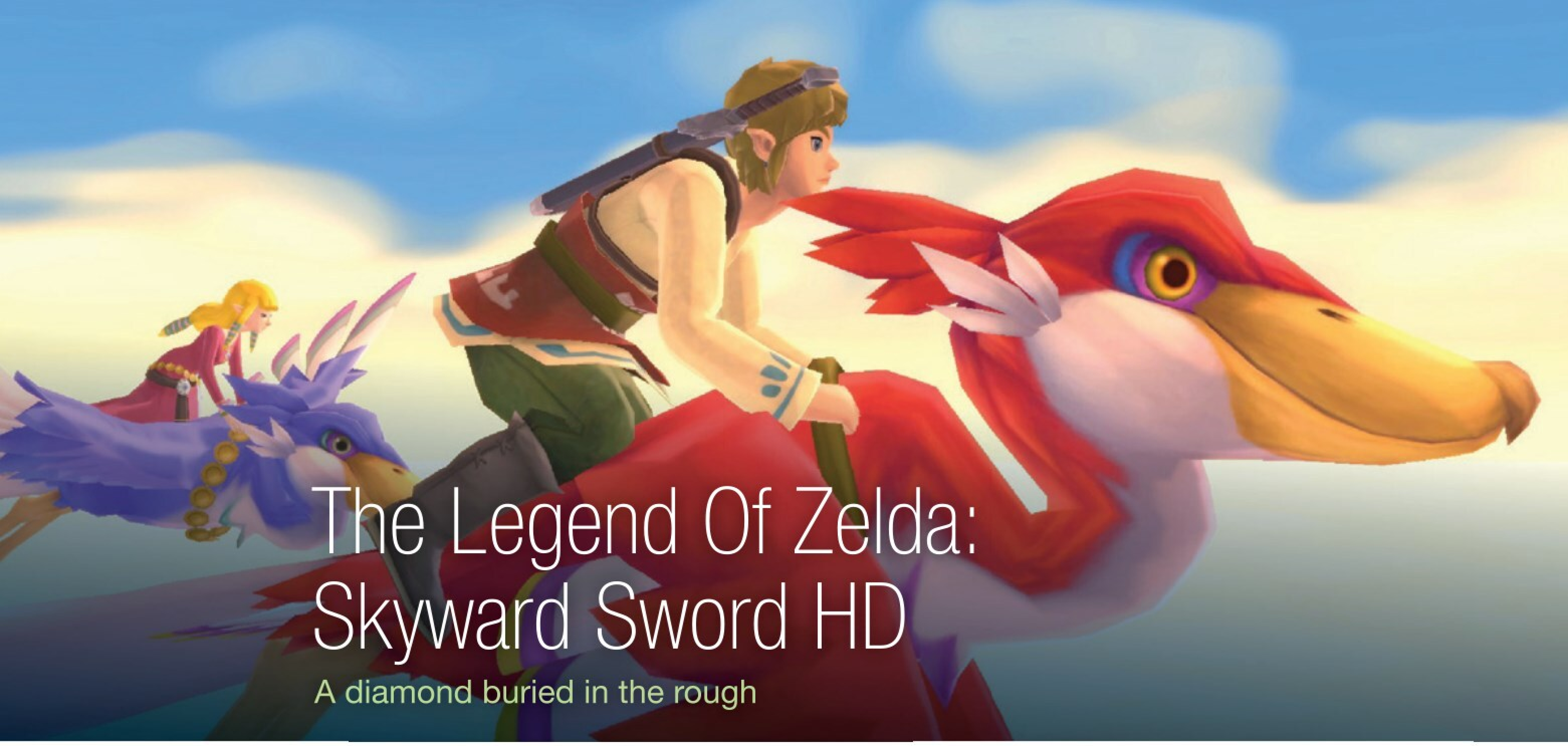
» Graphics
Wings of Ruin's stylized approach to characters and monsters is gorgeous and fits with the vibrant and beautiful open environments

» Sound
Monster Hunter Stories 2 features a wonderful orchestral score that's epic and, at times, whimsical

» Playability
While much easier to start than traditional Monster Hunter games, Stories 2 builds upon its easy-to-understand concept of monster collection and battling in fun and unique ways

» Entertainment
Hatching Monsties and battling alongside them against bigger monsters is fun and pulls its weight more than the lackluster story

» Replay Value
Moderate



The Legend Of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD

A diamond buried in the rough

8

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** July 16 **Rating** E10+

Switch

» **Concept**
Zelda's infamous Wii entry returns, but now players can flip between motion controls and button-only inputs

» **Graphics**
The 10-year-old graphics hold up surprisingly well thanks to solid art design and an HD upgrade

» **Sound**
The orchestrated music is beautiful and nuanced, but the limited grunts from NPCs feel goofy and outdated

» **Playability**
A handful of quality-of-life improvements – including the ability to use controller inputs – makes this a much smoother experience

» **Entertainment**
Skyward Sword has some of the best dungeon design in the series, but the sections between each dungeon are a slog

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Skyward Sword was never my favorite Zelda game. Nintendo's Wii-era take on its beloved franchise introduced motion controls that left me both flustered and annoyed during combat. At the same time, its dungeon and boss design remain some of the best the series has to offer. Skyward Sword HD revives this divisive game and papers over some of the original's biggest flaws. One of the most notable additions is a new button-only control scheme that allows players to experience the game without flailing their arms. Unfortunately, Skyward Sword's overall structure remains largely the same, and its abundance of fetch quests means this is still a game of dramatic peaks and valleys.

I'll cut right to the chase: Skyward Sword HD's new controller inputs are a step up from the original motion controls. Player's looking to relive the Wii's glory days can stick with the old control scheme and use their Switch Joy-Cons to swing Link's sword or aim his bow, and these motion controls work about as well as they did on the Wii – meaning they work about 85 percent of the time. I love the authenticity of swinging a remote and watching Link replicate my attack onscreen, but he too often slices instead of stabs, which can spell the difference between gaining the upper hand in combat or missing the enemy and taking a hit. These motion controls always seemed like a novelty anyway, so I'm glad Skyward Sword HD's button-only controls provide an alternative, using the right analog stick to replicate your sword's movements. The analog stick attacks are more consistent but still aren't as precise as the traditional button-based input found in other Zelda games. This system is also unintuitive; even after a few dozen hours, it felt unnatural jiggling the right stick at every approaching enemy. Fortunately, you don't have to be precise, and most enemies eventually fall if you persistently spam your attacks.

In addition to the new control scheme, Skyward Sword HD has several other welcome changes. You can now fast forward through dialogue and skip cutscenes altogether, which makes the story feel a little less plodding and allows you to blast through the chatter during a replay. The original release bombarded you with item descriptions, offering details on everything you picked up each time you started the game. Skyward Sword HD fixes that strange quirk and only makes you read item descriptions once. Finally, Amiibo support means you can fast travel at any time and your companion, Fi, now offers helpful advice at the press of a button to keep you from getting lost or stuck, which is something I wish I had 10 years ago.

All of Skyward Sword HD's small changes add up, but they don't fix the original's larger design issues. Skyward Sword's overworld is massive but largely empty, and the main quest is incredibly linear, which left me less excited to explore off the beaten path. Still, the game's biggest design flaw is its series of fetch quests you're forced to complete in each area. For example, before entering the first dungeon, you have to hunt down a group of anxious bird-like creatures who stick their head in the ground, masquerading as bushes. Later on, before entering a mining facility, you have to find a handful of broken generators. These quests feel like unnecessary padding, are full of mindless backtracking, and don't add anything meaningful to the narrative or your adventure. In fact, the only thing they add meaningfully to is your play clock.

It's a shame the journey to Skyward Sword's dungeons is so much work because the dungeons themselves are a high-water mark for the series. During Link's journey, you travel through a skeleton-infested cavern, a sand-trapped pirate ship, and an ancient temple buried in the heart of a volcano. The puzzles in each dungeon feel fresh even today, and each labyrinth invites you to use your ever-expanding toolset in inventive ways. Whether I was riding over rivers of lava on a giant boulder, using time stones to shift between eras, or swinging over vine-covered caverns like Indiana Jones, I consistently felt like I was on some wild adventure.

In some ways, Skyward Sword was the end of an era. It follows the pattern Nintendo established back in 1998 with The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, and it was the last game in the series before Nintendo reconceived the series with Breath of the Wild. In some ways, Skyward Sword perfects Ocarina's template, but that formula also feels well-worn and stuffed with unnecessary junk. Despite all the ways Nintendo updated this package, Skyward Sword remains far from my favorite entry in the series, but this is clearly the best way to play this blemished gem. » **Ben Reeves**

Dungeons & Dragons: Dark Alliance

Missing ingredients

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Wizards of the Coast **Developer** Tuque Games/Wizards Studio **Release** June 22 **Rating** M

Wanting something to be good doesn't make it so. I have a deep enthusiasm for the D&D tabletop game, fond memories of the R.A. Salvatore-penned novels that introduced these characters, and I was even excited about the revival of the cooperative Dark Alliance title from 20 years ago – I am the target audience for this fantasy action/RPG. Those preconditions are enough to make Dark Alliance a passable adventure in its early hours, especially when enjoyed with friends. But the deeper I played, the more the level design, character progression, cooperative elements, story, and combat mechanics began to fall apart, leaving the outline of an engaging adventure, but with few of the requisite features to fill in the middle.

The original Dark Alliance offered an isometric adventure in the vein of Diablo, but this new incarnation switches to a more engaged third-person perspective, with a big focus on stringing together combat moves, dodging out of danger, and even jumping and traversal elements. I like the emergent approach to attacks, which encourages players to combine light, heavy, and special moves to create their own favorite assaults. Unfortunately, the fundamentals of a tight melee exchange aren't there. Hit detection is dicey, and bad physics leads to weird moments and even insta-death for both you and enemy minions and bosses. Characters feel unwieldy and sluggish, refusing to break out of specific animations, and taking too long to drink life-saving potions. Stagger mechanics regularly take away control, leading to a sense of frustration and powerlessness as the bad guys rail on your unresponsive hero.

Levels are large and have lots of optional paths full of extra treasure, and I enjoy the variety of environments to discover throughout play. But some sequences are meandering, with more than a little backtracking. And some are simply too long, especially since the game doesn't allow for drop-in play during missions. The burden of these longer quests is at odds with the casual hack-and-slash feel of the broader game. The levels' enjoyability also gets held back by lackluster visual fidelity on most characters, environments, and monsters; everything lacks the coat of polish needed to compete in the current landscape of remarkably beautiful games.

Multiple selectable difficulties before each mission allow for proportionately higher rewards in gold and equipment. And I quite like the "push your luck" mechanic during a mission, where you can forgo short rests to boost your gear rarity. However, all but the lowest challenge levels are effectively inaccessible to solo players, as the game is clearly balanced with cooperative play in mind. That's well and good if you've consistently got a group of two or three friends at hand, but you're in trouble if you don't. The online matchmaking is a mess, frequently failing to make a connection. When it does match, there are almost no options for catering the group to the challenge or level that each player needs, so potential squadmates are often rightfully dropping to try and find a group that matches their goals.

The matchmaking problems and failure to balance for solo play have a cascading negative effect on progression. The quality of equipment eventually plateaus, since higher tiers of gear only show up in higher difficulties, and those difficulties offer constant one-hit kills from enemies, especially since your gear is too low to fight them. You can wait to find a team doing a mission you want to do at the appropriate difficulty, or create a custom game at that level and hope you have players of adequate skill join from the random queue. Still, it's all just a headache that encourages you instead to move on to a new game.

Developer Tuque Games has a clear affection for both the Forgotten Realms D&D setting, and the storied characters like Drizzt and Wulfgar who are the game's leads. That affection manifests as a wealth of lore for faithful fans, and the developer has gone to great pains to slot this narrative into an appropriate place within the companions' previously chronicled journeys. But the tales at hand all feel disjointed and lack cohesion, linking together to create a vague string of barely connected adventures, which never really go anywhere. From beholders to dragons, I had fun seeing some iconic creatures from the tabletop role-playing game make an appearance, but the potential for genuine storytelling or character development is lost in the ceaseless swing of scimitars and hammers.

With multiple collectible gear sets, magic-infused combat, and characters with distinct powers, building up a fun rhythm of play is possible, especially if you choose to tackle the entire game with a consistent group of players who stay in pace with each other's progress. But even then, the cracks in the core experience are apparent. I wanted to have fun with Dark Alliance's breezy adventures through a familiar fantasy world, but too many elements left me disappointed, and even the flashing weapons wielded by the Companions of the Hall weren't enough to blind me to what was missing. » **Matt Miller**

6

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Team up as well-known D&D characters to take on goblins, giants, and dragons in a by-the-numbers looter

» **Graphics**
Muddy environment textures and drab main character models don't meet visual expectations

» **Sound**
Voice acting is solid, and the music is familiar fantasy fare

» **Playability**
Deep problems in control, hit detection, an over-reliance on stagger mechanics, and a flawed approach to balancing all hold back the skeleton of a solid combat system

» **Entertainment**
Hacking and slashing with friends is always fun, but Dark Alliance has too many problems to recommend when so many other cooperative experiences offer more

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

8.75 Chicory: A Colorful Tale

Platform PS5 • PS4 • PC • Mac **Release** June 10 **Rating** E10+

Within minutes, this inventive little gem won me over. Chicory might look like a coloring book, but, at heart, it's a Zelda-inspired adventure full of humorous dialogue and weighty themes that left me a little glassy-eyed. – Ben Reeves

8.5 Ender Lilies: Quietus Of The Knights

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release June 22 (Switch, PC), June 28, 2021 (Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One), July 20 (PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4) **Rating** T

Ender Lilies doesn't revolutionize Metroid's decades-old template, but that's okay. It's a well-made experience, and I had a great time pouring over two dozen hours into this adventure. – Marcus Stewart

8.75 Griftlands

Platform Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release June 4 **Rating** T

Klei Entertainment's card battler sounds similar to games like Slay the Spire, but the differentiator is an interconnected world full of characters and factions where your actions and relationships actually matter. – John Carson

8.25 Watch Dogs: Legion – Bloodline

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** July 6 **Rating** M

The latest DLC for Legion offers satisfying closure for both Aiden and Wrench. It showed us how much each protagonist has grown since their time in the spotlight. If you're a fan of the previous Watch Dogs games, Bloodline is a must-play. I'd even go so far as to say I enjoyed it more than Legion. – Liana Ruppert

Visit gameinformer.com for the full reviews

8.75 Final Fantasy VII Remake Intergrade

Platform PS5 **Release** June 10 **Rating** T

Intermission's abbreviated plotline never really lands the mark, but it ultimately serves as a strong introduction to a beloved protagonist while hinting at what's to come in additional Final Fantasy VII content.
– Jason Guisao

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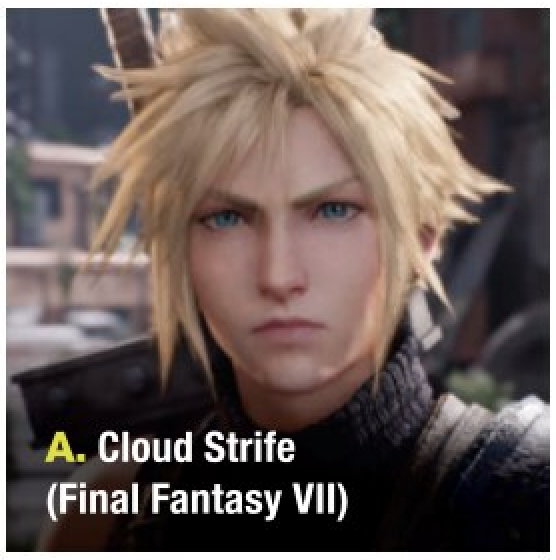
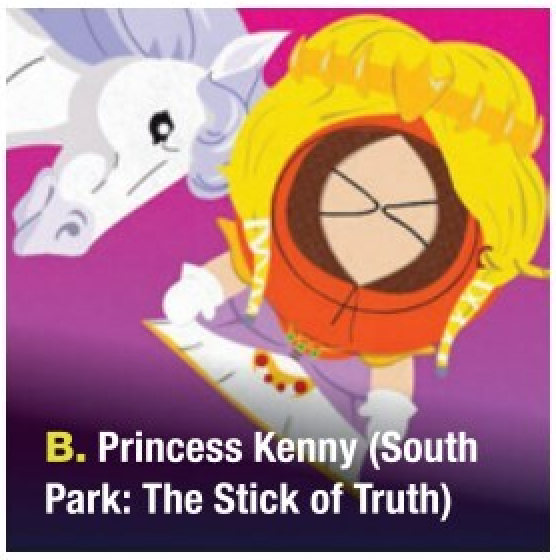
Match The RPG Hair With The Haiku

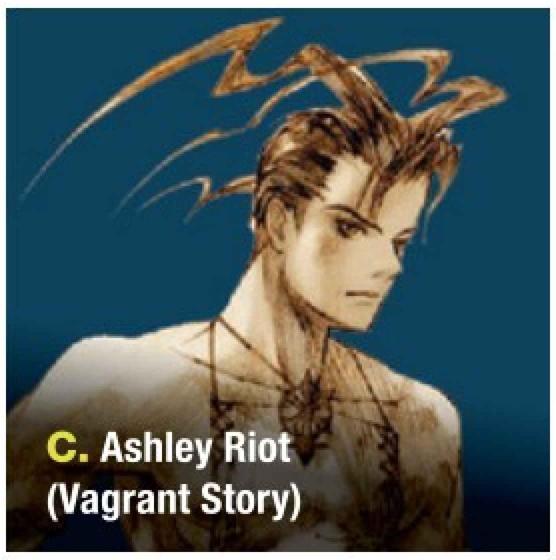
They're spiky, they're swoopy, sometimes they're even droopy. We're talking about RPG hairstyles, which are often a character's defining trait due to their overt wackiness. If you fancy yourself a role-playing aficionado, odds are you can identify a character based on their hairdo alone. But what if you had to rely on a terribly written haiku to determine the hair in question? Strap on those poetry hats and see if you can match the hair with the haiku. ***by Marcus Stewart***



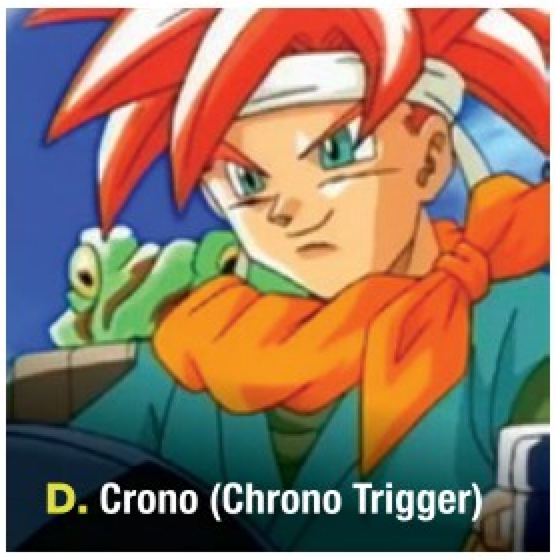
A. Cloud Strife (Final Fantasy VII)



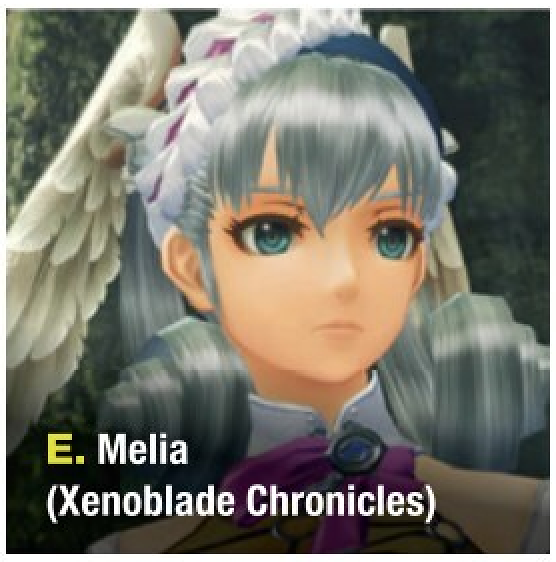
B. Princess Kenny (South Park: The Stick of Truth)



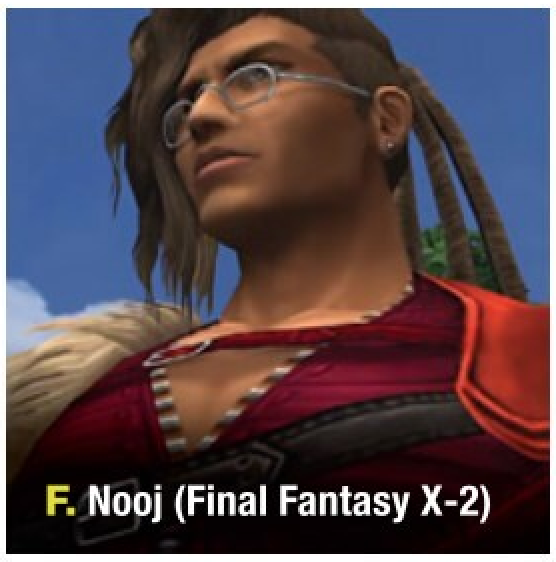
C. Ashley Riot (Vagrant Story)



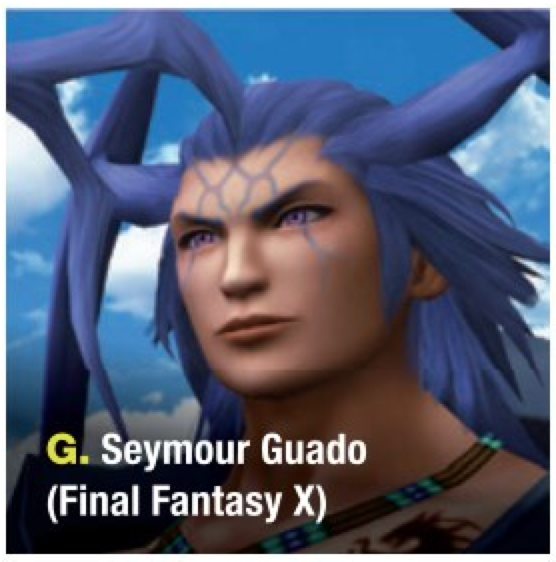
D. Crono (Chrono Trigger)



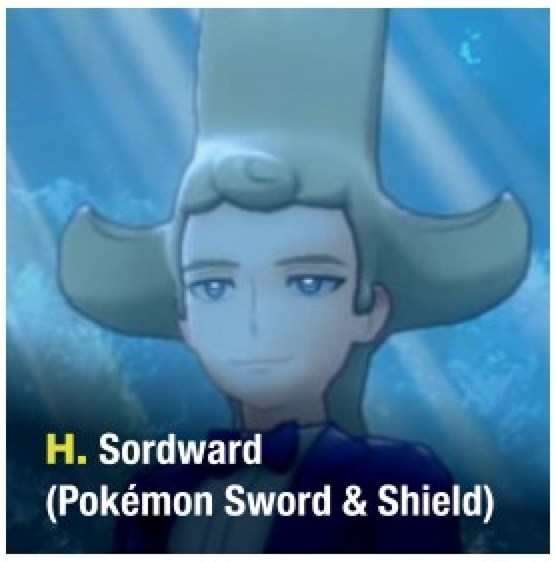
E. Melia (Xenoblade Chronicles)



F. Nooj (Final Fantasy X-2)



G. Seymour Guado (Final Fantasy X)



H. Sordward (Pokémon Sword & Shield)

1. ___ Azure tentacles / Unfathomable angles / Seriously, what?

2. ___ Explosion of spikes / Contained by a dam of cloth / A fiery mess

3. ___ Loose ends abound here / Ribbons of hairy pasta / A stylist's nightmare

4. ___ Coils wound oh so tight / Desperately want to straighten / Or would they snap back?

5. ___ A crown for a king / The frame for unflinching calm / Famous though stupid

6. ___ A bit on the nose / This appears just as it sounds / Tall and unwieldy

7. ___ Holy crap, that hair! / It's anime Howard Stern / Rope-like decadence

8. ___ Regal elegance / The definition of fair / Wait, is that a wig? ◆

ANSWER KEY: 1-G, 2-D, 3-C, 4-E, 5-A, 6-H, 7-F, 8-B

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